

July 26, 2026—The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
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Heaven Is Like

I think parables are like poems. They're not just simple comparisons, right?, like saying "a cupcake is like a muffin." That's not a particularly interesting comparison. But in poetry, you often find yourself in the realm of simile and metaphor. "O my Luve's like a red, red rose That's newly sprung in June," goes the poem by Robert Burns, and you immediately wonder, "oh? how so?" and you can spend a whole period of English class unpacking it. A parable is more like that. It's a simile, a poem, almost sort of a riddle that you have to puzzle at to get at the meaning—or, I should say, the meanings because I think there's usually more than one. And a parable is usually surprising and disruptive and wonderful—just like the kingdom of heaven, the work of God in the world that they're talking about.

It's easy for us to miss the surprise in these parables, because our social context, our modern world is so very different from the one Jesus lived in. I don't know what mustard plants look like, I had to dig around to figure out what a "measure" of flour is, and I'm taking the word of the translators about what all these words actually mean. But I flatter myself that I do know a thing or two about telling stories, so what I want to do is try to put a fresh face on these parables.

So Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed." Oh? How so? Try thinking about it this way: The work of God in the world is like a blackberry seed, which someone took and sowed in their field, presumably because they were done trying to grow other crops there. I imagine this person saying, "Augh, whatever the opposite of a green thumb is, that's what I have; I couldn't even grow blackberries in this stupid field of mine!" Right? Because it is the nature of blackberries to grow where you don't want them to. Blackberries are the things you have to dig out when you want to make a field fit for planting. But this desperate person, maybe trying to prove a point, goes out and plants a blackberry seed. That's a pretty tiny seed, but when it grows, well, you know how it can just take over. It is the greatest of bushes! And it becomes a tree—if you can imagine a blackberry tree. And just like Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had a dream where he saw himself and his great kingdom like a towering tree with all the nations of the world under his sway like birds nesting in the branches; the kingdom of God is like this blackberry tree, spreading its brambles into all the world.

So the work of God in the world is like a blackberry seed. How so? Because it starts with some crazy fool who encourages this tiny, disruptive nuisance to grow—and it does grow, into something huge and sprawling, something that takes over, that you couldn't root out if you wanted to. And instead of a towering tree it's a wild shrub; and the ruler of this kingdom isn't like Nebuchadnezzar on his great throne—no, this king rides into his capital city on the back of a donkey.

Then Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast." Oh? How so? Try thinking about it this way: The work of God in the world is like sourdough starter, which someone took and mixed in with bag after bag of flour, leavening it all, making fifty loaves of bread from that one starter. That takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of work, refreshing the starter every day, separating some dough to bake and some dough to keep leavening. But the result is food for meal after meal after meal.

So Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field." Oh? How so? Try thinking about it this way: The work of God in the world is like a lost Rembrandt painting in an abandoned storage unit. So the storage facility is having an auction, selling the entire contents of the unit to the highest bidder. (I don't know if they really do that, but I saw it on TV once.) And before the auction starts, someone spots the Rembrandt and recognizes its value, so they sell everything else they own, even the title to their house and car, to win the auction and claim the storage unit, including the priceless painting. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's a treasure found in an unexpected place—not hanging on the wall of a palace or

museum, but hidden away in an abandoned storage unit. Not everyone can spot the value of that priceless painting, but if you recognize it, of course you buy it—it's worth far more than everything you own.

So Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls." Oh? How so? Try thinking about it this way: The work of God in the world is like an antique dealer who goes around to yard sales and estate sales every weekend. They're always the first person to show up as soon as the sale begins, looking for anything that's more valuable than the current owners realize so they can buy it cheap and sell it for a lot of money. And one day this antique dealer shows up at an estate sale and sees an absolutely amazing antique dresser. It's worth a large fortune and it costs a small fortune. So the antique dealer goes and sells everything else in the store to buy this amazing dresser. Because the dealer trusts that just this one sale will outmatch everything else they could sell in their store.

Now, it's funny, this story sounds a lot like the one about the Rembrandt in the storage unit. And because the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl appear together in Matthew's Gospel, it's easy to read them as basically the same story. But notice: The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, the first parable says, and the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant, the second one says. The work of God in the world is like the priceless Rembrandt, yes, and it's also like the antique dealer, or the person who buys the Rembrandt. The kingdom of God is looking for valuable things and is willing to make sacrifices to get them.

So Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown in the sea and caught fish of every kind." Oh? How so? Try thinking about it this way: The work of God in the world is like a sweeping embrace, wide enough to catch us all up in Love's divine arms, whether good or evil or—like all of us, really—somewhere in between. But I like to imagine that we all, as we ride along in that embrace, get better and better. And maybe, at the end of the story—if indeed the story of the world has an end—the angels will come out and find a great big net full of pretty good fish. I don't know. What I do know, what this parable tells me, is that it's not my job to sort out the evil from the good. We're all caught up in the same net, the same sweeping embrace, and it's not until the end of the age that there is to be any kind of sorting.

So Jesus says, "Have you understood all this?" And his disciples answered "yes," but my general philosophy about the parables of Jesus is that if you think you understand a parable, that just means you're not done exploring it. The work of God in the world is like a blackberry seed, growing like mad and spreading its tangle around the world. It's like a sourdough starter, that with work and care and patience will feed a multitude. It's like a Rembrandt in a storage unit, a priceless treasure in an unexpected place, and it's like an antique dealer, who will pay any price for a worthwhile treasure. The work of God in the world is like a sweeping embrace that scoops us all up and will let none of us escape the love of God until the end of the age. Because, as Paul wrote, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Fundamentally, friends, a parable is an invitation—an invitation to think about the ways that God is working in the world and how we are involved in that work. It's an invitation to be curious, to ask "how so?" and consider the whole range and depth of meaning contained in just a few words. It's an invitation to take a new look at familiar things, to see God's hand in unexpected places, and to open ourselves to the possibility that God might be working in ways we can't readily see or understand—ways that are surprising and disruptive and wonderful.

May our curiosity make us open to the work of the Spirit, and as we seek the kingdom of God, may we find it right close at hand, right where we least expect it.

Thanks be to God.