

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

³¹ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Over the twenty-two years that I worked in the youth ministry in two congregations, I discovered that I had to constantly learn the ever-changing lingo of youth. I remember learning that when a teenager used the word, "sick" when describing a rock band, they meant that it was a great band, not a terrible band. I remember the first time one of the kids said to me, "my bad." I was confused until it was explained to me that "my bad" meant my mistake. But the one word that I heard my youth say most often was the word, "like." Some teenagers used it so often that I found it to be annoying. Perhaps you can relate to how I felt, and to this story.

The following conversation took place between two girls from Southern California.

"So, like uhh, what do you want to like, do today?"

"I don't know, like, it's such a beautiful day out, we should, like, go to the beach."

"That sounds like a good idea, but like, how are we going to get there?"

"Like, uh, let's call Mike and see if he'll, like, give us a ride."

"Are you sure that's, like, a good idea? Like, didn't you two just, like, break up?"

"Well, I mean, like, the last time we talked he was, like, 'I think we should see other people,' and then I was, like, 'but Mike, I, like, really like you.'"

"Like, oh my gosh, and then, like, what did he say next?"

"He was, like, 'I like you too, but I just can't be with someone who says, like, so much.'"

This example is not an exaggeration for the frequency of the word. "like" being used in a sentence. Adults have also adopted the use of the word in a similar fashion. I have to wonder, how did this intrusive use of "like" get started.

The proper definitions of the word "like" is to say that something is similar to something else, for example: "Written Spanish is kind of like Portuguese." Or when we want to say something is agreeable with us; for example: "Peter likes making pizza."

But the way the word 'like' gets used these days has expanded. There are people who study this sort of thing, and they tell us that the word "like," is being used also as a pause in a

sentence. There are other meaningless words used as pauses in an effort to keep conversations flowing. The words "um," "er," "uh or ah," and, "you know" are used as a vocalized pause.

Another use of the word "like" is to add emphasis to something that you are saying. For example, if someone asks you, "How was your trip to the beach?" You might answer, "Oh, it was, like, perfect!"

I could go on with more descriptions for the use of the word "like," but let it suffice to say, it's become a very versatile word. Did you ever notice Jesus chooses to use the word "like," usually as he wants to make a point when telling a parable. We hear him saying it in all six of the short parables we read today. I believe Jesus wisely chose the words he used to teach his valuable lessons. While it's true that he used the word, "like" to say that something is similar to something else; he also uses the word "like" as an invitation to think intensely upon something, creating the opportunity for personal discovery and meaning. I'm a firm believer that when we ponder and discover meaning in some truth, we digest it deeply and it takes root in our thoughts and being.

We might wish that Jesus didn't use the word "like" in his parables. We might wish he was more direct, telling us exactly what something is. We might wish he said, "The kingdom of heaven" is, and following this with an accurate description. Some of us prefer things to be super easy. Instead, in presenting it as Jesus does, the story becomes more memorable because we need to think about it, rather than the story becoming mere words that quickly go in-one-ear-and-out the other.

In each of these six parables, Jesus begins by saying, "the kingdom of heaven is like, " You may remember me telling you last week when we took a look at the parable of the wheat and the weeds, that the kingdom of heaven is a term that appears only in Matthew's Gospel. The other three gospels use the term, kingdom of God, but the two terms are the same thing. The kingdom of heaven is not a geographic location, but a spiritual realm where God rules and where we share in his eternal life in the present and the future. We join the kingdom when we trust in Christ as our Savior.

We might ask ourselves why Jesus put such an emphasis on describing the kingdom of heaven at those moments in time. Looking at the context for the parables may give us some insights into this. Matthew tells us prior to Jesus sharing these parables that there was a growing opposition to Jesus. We see this particularly in chapter 11 as we read about the arrest of John the Baptist, cousin and forerunner to Jesus; and we read that Jesus tangles with the scribes and Pharisees over the law. This opposing force causes Jesus and his disciples into a tighter relationship with one another in order to support one another through the tension and persecution. This bond was the beginning of what will eventually become the church. A living organism of the kingdom.

The parables in Matthew 13 are stories describing the church, the same church Jesus began talking about later in chapter 16 when he named Peter as the "Rock" on which he would build the church, and the coming about of the fulfillment of the kingdom. Jesus at this point was ready to explain the kingdom of heaven and the life found for the believers in it.

In the first two parables, the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, Jesus uses this imagery to help us understand the growth of the kingdom. In both parables, the emphasis is on small beginnings that lead to large results. Jesus's disciples were a small group, at that point in time, in the early stages of faith development and mission. Eventually, as they grew in their faith and understanding, nurtured by Jesus' teachings and participating in the mission of Christ, they became the church...the church that grew tremendously, the church of which we are a part today.

We may wonder sometimes if what we do for Christ really makes a difference to anyone. Our efforts might seem so small in the grand scheme of things, yet Jesus wants us to know that every effort, every effort, matters, we just may not always know it does.

Jesus said, then, that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that is worked into other ingredients to become a dough that rises and is baked into bread. Hearing this, memories of days gone by are triggered for me. I can't help but remember the days when I was a stay-at-home mom and I made bread regularly for us to use for our sandwiches. I watched and waited for the dough to rise, knowing that in the rising there was a successful product. Then baking it filled the house with a delightful aroma. If the windows were open, the aroma could be smelled by our neighbors, sometimes leading to a neighborly conversation, and maybe even a request for a taste of the bread.

Likewise, Jesus tells us in these simple stories, that our efforts, no matter how small they may seem, have great power to grow the church into the living body of Christ, inviting everyone into the kingdom of heaven.

The next three parables are parables that remind us of the joy found in the kingdom. The Abingdon Preaching Annual from 2005 eloquently and succinctly describes the reasons for this joy as follows: The parables "remind us how good the Good News of Jesus really is. To experience radical forgiveness undeserved and unexpected is like finding a chest of gold in a forgotten field. To receive the uncommon love of God's church is like finding one priceless pearl in an ocean of tiny round balls. To be accepted 'warts and all' in the family of God is like being treated with respect and value when other relationships and groups of human beings have treated us with disrespect; it's being named 'good' when we know we are far less."

Finding joy in the kingdom motivates believers to rid oneself of wrong and unnecessary things, so as to know more deeply the richness of kingdom joy, the joy of our salvation, the joy of knowing Jesus, the joy of being welcomed with open arms into the presence of God and the joy of sharing it with others.

In verses 49-50, we find ourselves confronted with words of warning similar to what we heard in the parable of the wheat and the tares. In the end, judgement comes and those who have attacked and tried to tear down the kingdom will be justly dealt with, not by us, but by God.

Jesus asked if the disciples understood what Jesus was trying to teach them and they said they did. It's then that he said, "that every disciple in the kingdom is like the owner of a house who brings out of the storeroom new treasures as well as old." Specifically, to them he was saying that although he came to shake things up and turn the kingdom upside-down, he did not come to say that everything taught before him should be forgotten. As Jesus said in other places in the bible, he came not to get rid of the old law, but to fulfill the law. There is good in the old teachings, guidelines that work side by side with the new, fulfilling teachings that Jesus brought.

But those stubborn in the ways of old and resting in the beliefs that one would come to build a physical kingdom, would never know the true kingdom; because the true kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. It's a kingdom initiated by the coming of Christ, which begins now in our lives when we welcome Christ into our lives. Jesus wants us to embrace his teachings, paying close attention to lessons we learn from the past, but recognizing when Jesus' teachings need to take priority.

Sometimes we want concrete, undeniable proof that the kingdom of heaven is in our midst now. We don't want to hear the "It's like, " stuff. Maybe that's because we don't want to do the work to look for the kingdom, or maybe it's because we don't want to give up stuff and thoughts that might make it more real to us. We may want it to be easily found, not only by us, but by others so that we don't need to do the work of helping others find it.

But Jesus knew what he was doing when he said, "the kingdom of heaven is like, " It's his way of inviting us into discovering the richness of a living kingdom.