

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 26, 2026 – 9 Pentecost
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 – Parables of the Kingdom
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This is the third week we have been considering the parables of Jesus found in Matthew's Gospel. First, the Parable of the Sower, then the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, and now five very brief parables, some quite familiar to many of us. It is unlikely that Jesus spoke them one after the other, as we have just heard them. He probably used them on several occasions in different contexts. Matthew grouped them together in good literary style, giving us a collection of parables that have some similarities in content as well as being very short, especially compared to the parables we've heard in the last two weeks.

The first two parables have similarities with each other. The tiny mustard seed grows into the greatest of shrubs. The small quantity of yeast leavens a huge quantity of flour, approximately sixty pounds. We may see these two parables as referring to the work of God and the growth of God's kingdom. We may see the mustard seed and the yeast as the Holy Spirit, or as God's grace, or even as the gift of faith given to those who trust God. The parable helps us see clearly that without the seed or the yeast, there would be no growth, no homes for the birds or bread for the hungry.

At the same time, the growth of God's kingdom is not inevitable. There are conditions that must be present. The seed must have gotten enough light and water to grow so well. The woman needed to mix the yeast with flour and keep the mixture at the right temperature for the right amount of time, in order for the leavening to occur. Our part is providing the conditions for God's work to thrive, in our souls, in the church, and in the world. We can kill the seed with neglect. We can be too busy with other matters to mix the yeast with the flour. Or we can tend the growth of God's gifts.

The second pair of parables in this morning's lesson may be understood to be about investment, our investment in God's kingdom. Jesus is not recommending the kind of sound investment strategy we hear about – a good mix of low-risk and higher-risk investments meant to keep capital safe and maximize earnings. He isn't recommending that we hedge our bets on God. The picture he offers is very different.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." A man – probably a poor man, since he had to sell everything he owned to purchase one field – stumbles upon a treasure. He wasn't looking for treasure. He was probably plowing, as he did most days, when the blade of the plow struck a jar containing valuables. Totally unexpected treasure found in an ordinary field! For many of us, that is how we find God. We are busy with ordinary life – with work and family, perhaps even church activities – and suddenly God breaks into our lives. Through human love. In an extraordinary moment of seeing the beauty of the world. Through the kindness of a stranger, the words of a book, the line of a hymn, in prayer or the bread and wine of the Eucharist, help from an unexpected source in a time of need. When we think over our lives, haven't we all been touched by God this way, when we have known in our hearts that the Lord has been at work? These are priceless moments, of extraordinary value.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." This merchant is a seeker, a wealthy man in search of one of the ancient world's most valued objects, fine pearls. He is on a quest, and when he finds what he is seeking, he gives all that he has for this treasure. Some of us are like this man. We have been searching for something all our lives – for meaning, for answers to our deepest questions, for something beyond the ordinary, beyond the limitations of human life, for our true home. We keep seeking, investing more and more of ourselves in the search for God, with growing faith in the promise of Jesus, "ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7). God is a treasure worthy of all we have. The kingdom of heaven is near when, with joy, we exchange everything for that treasure.

These two parables point to the supreme value of the kingdom of God. When people discover God's kingdom, when they experience the love of God, when they know Jesus, life's priorities are changed. God takes precedence over everything else.

The last parable in today's lesson is less familiar than the others. It is the Parable of the Dragnet, and it is found only in Matthew's Gospel. It is actually the seventh parable in the group of seven we have considered these three weeks. By placing it as the seventh of seven parables, Matthew is giving this parable prominence of place, according to the writing custom of his time. This parable has important teachings for the disciples of Jesus.

In Jesus' day there were two different kinds of nets for different kinds of fishing. One was a casting net, a small, circular net with weights tied to the edges. The fisherman would watch for a school of fish he wanted and cast the net among the school. The net would sink down and trap the fish. This method was for targeted fishing.

But Jesus describes a very different type of fishing. A large net was dragged behind a boat or between boats, and the net gathered everything in its path. This net caught "all kinds." The parable emphasizes the diversity of the in-gathering of God. We see this diversity in the people Jesus associated with – sinners, tax collectors, a Roman centurion, people with leprosy and all kinds of diseases, people possessed by demons, Jews and Gentiles, a little child, a disciple who betrays Jesus, a disciple who denies Jesus, Pharisees who plot his death, women who anointed him with oil. "All kinds." This is important for us to remember today, when some people in each of the denominations of the church call vehemently to exclude others – from the church or ordained ministry or even from the hope of heaven – because they aren't considered the "right kind" for some reason. I think that anyone who has felt excluded by others from full participation or a rightful place in Christ's church will be very sensitive to this issue. God gathers in "all kinds."

Jesus speaks about "the end of the age" when the "good catch" will be divided from the "bad catch" by the angels of God. It is clear in this parable, as in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, that the judgment at the end of the age belongs to God. God's harvest. God's catch. God's call.

When we considered the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds last week, I remarked that the wheat and the weeds grow together not only in the world but also in the church. It is an ancient understanding in Christian theology that there is a "visible" church – the church we see of people who belong to churches and profess the Christian faith – and an "invisible" church, meaning the "true church" known only to God and thus "invisible" to us. The "true church" is not necessarily identical to the "visible" church. St. Augustine, a theologian who lived from 354 to 430 C.E., wrote of the church, "How many sheep are without, how many wolves within!" Again, it is for God to know who is a sheep – within or outside of the church – and who is a wolf – within or outside of the church. We are tempted to make judgments in God's place, and we need to resist that temptation.

One final word about God's judgment. I think it is important to take seriously the warnings in Jesus' teaching about judgment, especially if these warnings help us walk in the ways of God, day by day and decision by decision. But we must always remember that God's mercy is vast, beyond our comprehension, beyond the best examples of human mercy.

In these seven parables Jesus gives us hope. Life will not always be this way, in a world where good is challenged and thwarted and harmed by evil. Even now, God breaks into ordinary human life, and we are blessed to know God's love, God's healing power, God's mercy and compassion. Jesus promises that God's kingdom of goodness and love will finally be established forever. With faith and hope may we seek and serve God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, guided by Jesus who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In the name of the Lord. Amen.