

Advent Lutheran Church
Start Small
June 22, 2025
Matthew 13:31-35

This morning's sermon is participatory. I'll share a list of items and then invite you to figure out how they fit together.

List #1: Swimming pools, vacation, no school, very hot weather

Answer #1: Summer

Wonderful. I'll increase the level of difficulty.

List #2: persistent widow, house builders, great banquet, a sower, talents, mustard seed, yeast

Answer #2: These, of course, are everyday first century things that Jesus chooses for object lessons; they are his teaching tools. In his parables, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is a lot like normal every day stuff, except with a twist. More on the twist in a minute.

I spent too much of my week pondering an unanswerable question. If Jesus had come in the twenty-first century instead of the first century, what everyday items might have found their way into his parables?

Imagine hearing Jesus explain that the kingdom of heaven is like a microwave, a traffic jam, a day trader, a social media influencer, a shopping cart, or an endless buffet.

Jesus' favorite way to teach was to tell stories. As far as we know, he never once gave a lecture. He certainly never wrote a blog post or published an academic paper. Jesus went where the people were and sought to make clear what the kingdom is all about. God's kingdom. Not any earthly empire or kingdom – no matter how big or how great – not back in the first century and not now in the twenty-first.

As a former religion professor, I would enjoy spending the next hour or perhaps even two teaching you all about parables. I could go into great detail about the 30 to 40 parables that appear in the New Testament – and yes, I’m offering a range because scholars debate the exact number.

Instead, I’ll share with you my favorite definition of a parable, which comes from Charles McCullough, a pastor and sculptor who spent decades creating sculptures to represent each of Jesus’ parables. According to Pastor Charles,

“Parables are metaphors or similes, plus narratives, usually with a surprise turn that points towards God’s Empire and away from all other empires.”¹

Since most people know the most famous of Jesus’ parables –the Good Samaritan or Prodigal Son – this summer we will explore seven of Jesus lesser-known parables. And that exploration begins now. As does my heeding of my own advice to talk in story rather than in lists of facts.

To begin this series, I figured we should start small. And according to today’s Gospel lesson you can’t get any smaller than the smallest seed – the mustard seed.²

This is wild! And it’s a sure sign that God’s kingdom looks nothing like earthly kingdoms or nation states or empires. When I think about the Roman Empire I think about all of the ways it went big to demonstrate its power. This pattern isn’t unique to the Romans; it has been repeated by empire after empire across the centuries and continues today in our modern American Empire.

Empire shows off. Empire talks big. Empire stockpiles military arsenal. Empire rules with might. And empire reserves the right to demand much of its citizens and even more of its noncitizens.

¹ Charles McCullough. *The Art of Parables: Reinterpreting the Teaching Stories of Jesus in Word & Sculpture*, 2008, p.25.

² Mustard isn’t the smallest seed of that time or any time. This hyperbolic language is employed to support the teaching of the parable.

So, Jesus is throwing us a curveball right away. He tells us that his empire looks different. It is like a tiny seed. It is small and inconsequential. It easily goes unnoticed. Its initial growth will happen out of sight, underground.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed – a plant that will grow and grow and, if not stopped, will spread uncontrollably. First century listeners would have heard mustard like modern listeners hear the word “weeds.” When we plant a garden, the last thing we want is for our garden to be overcome by weeds. If a weed appears and then becomes a few weeds soon it will be out of control and your harvest will be ruined.

But that’s not all. In today’s very short reading, we also hear Jesus sharing that his kingdom is like yeast that a woman worked into some flour until she managed to get it throughout the dough.

Siblings in Christ, I’m not a chef but am capable of performing basic math. Think about your pantry at home. How many of you have 60 pounds or more of flour at the ready for your next baking project? This woman was working on a massive recipe! She had begun working on enough to make bread for a big crowd – perhaps 150 people!

Unfortunately, the NIV doesn’t do the best job of translating the verb that tells us about the woman’s work to place the yeast into the dough. Other translations come closer to what the Greek intends when they translate her work as “hiding.” The woman hid the yeast in this huge batch of dough. It was a quiet act she performed with intent.

And, think about Jesus’ choice of this particular common object. Yeast is a bad thing nearly everywhere else in Scripture. When yeast appears in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere in the New Testament it usually signals corruption. That makes this an unexpected twist: using yeast to signal something positive.³

³ M. Eugene Boring. *New Interpreters Bible: Matthew, Vol VIII*, p.309.

So, we are told, the kingdom of heaven is like yeast – something that starts hidden in the dough but soon enough becomes apparent to all.

M. Eugene Boring was a New Testament scholar who taught nearby in Fort Worth at Brite Divinity School. He summarizes these two short back-to-back parables as “not the natural and expected, but the supernatural and surprising.” He goes on to offer the following modern analogy to summarize both:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a preacher who preached every Sunday to a congregation of twenty-five people in a city of two million residents. The preacher kept on preaching until the whole city believed the gospel.”⁴

It’s time now for another list. If you are keeping track, this is List #3. As I share the list be thinking about what it is that links the items together.

List #3: welcoming a newcomer, teaching children, visiting someone who is homebound, baking and sharing sweet treats, calling someone on the prayer list, cleaning the windows

Answer #3: Each of these are simple acts of faith. They are some of the ways we can start small when we live out our faith. And, they are acts that can and often do grow in unexpected ways.

In Jesus’ time the global population was under 200 million.⁵ People who followed the Way of Jesus were relatively few in number. As the message of this new kind of kingdom began to spread around the region the number of Christians grew. Today, Christianity is the world’s largest religion, numbering some 2.3 billion followers worldwide.⁶

This morning, we are reminded to start small and to start now.

⁴ Ibid., 311.

⁵ World Population History, <https://worldpopulationhistory.org/map/42/mercator/1/0/25/>

⁶ Pew Research Center. “Christian Population Change” in *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed from 2010 to 2020*, June 9, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/christian-population-change/>

May we be kingdom people, part of the kingdom of God – God's heavenly realm – a reality that is unlike any earthly kingdom. Amen.