

Bible Study for July 26th, 2026

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

³¹ [Jesus] put before [the crowds] 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 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.”

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Theologian and scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes that “parables and the tellers of parables were there to prompt them to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and at times to indict.”¹

When looking at this list of little parables in this reading, let’s try to be challenged – even annoyed – by them. Let’s be open to being uncomfortable, to being provoked by these little stories.

Also, each parable is basically its own sermon. There are so many fun and irritating rabbit holes to go down, so it’s okay to not hit on every single piece of this reading.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed... and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. HarperCollins, 2014.

Well, the mustard seed doesn't grow into a tree, so already this parable is confusing. How can something that is considered a weed, a shrub, or plant, be as big and homey as a tree? We wouldn't expect birds to make nests in little shrubs when big trees with large branches are available.

Maybe the kingdom of heaven shows up in places we least expect, in the people and groups our culture or society wouldn't label as "holy" or "sacred". Maybe it pops up in the "wrong" places, with the "wrong" people. Maybe God's kingdom – reign, kin-dom – is where we least expect it to be. Maybe the reign of God makes its home in the people and places labeled lowly (like a weed), not good enough, wrong, different.

Where do we often assume God and God's reign will show up? Where might we least expect (or where might our culture least expect) God's kin-dom to be? How might God be making Their home in unexpected places and spaces?

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...

Apparently, some mustard plants are invasive and can crowd out plants in their ecosystems². They are a pain in the butt, destructive to native ecosystems. These are very negative connotations. Mustard plants can be seen as pesky pests.

How might God's kingdom – reign, dominion, kin-dom – be invasive or pesky? How might God's reign be destructive to the reign of this world, to the reign of Empire, to the reign of sin and evil? How is the reign of God being pesky to the ways of the world? How might God's reign of love, inclusion, mercy, and grace be invading our ecosystems built on hatred, violence, division, and harm?

Who and where are the pesky mustard seed plants in our world, the ones who are challenging the status quo and working to dismantle harmful systems and structures?

How might the other parables be provocative and invite us to think about God's reign, kin-dom, dominion, etc. in ways that might initially be a bit uncomfortable?

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in...

The Greek word that is translated as 'mixed in' is ἐγκρύπτω (enkryptō), which means to hide, to conceal, to embed. How is the kingdom of heaven hidden, but expanding? How is the kingdom of heaven embedded in the world in which we live, even when we cannot see it? Where is God's mercy 'hidden' amongst us? Where is the love of God seemingly concealed, but actually growing and expanding?

How might these parables be inviting us to see God's reign, dominion, kin-dom, kingdom in a way that is less obvious? How might the parables be provoking us to notice the uncomfortable parts of God's reign, the parts that may not fit the status quo or assumed norms of our day?

² <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/indiana/stories-in-indiana/garlic-mustard/>