

Centre Congregational Church, UCC  
The Rev Dr Scott Couper  
Sunday, July 30, 2023  
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
Union Sunday

“Cultivating Kin-dom”  
Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52



Credit: James Janknegt, "Parable of the Leaven", from *Progressive Involvement*, July 24, 2017

A parable is a succinct didactic story, that is, a short illustrative moral or principled lesson. In Hebrew, it is called a *mashal*, which means ‘side by side’, or parallel explanations.<sup>1</sup> A *mashal* is most similar to an allegory. Most of the parables in the gospels are short pithy comparisons beginning with “The Kingdom of God is like...” and then a brief example is made. Other parables are longer narratives, almost always with human characters. The gospels record between

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Sahms, “Modern Day Parables”, *Reflections on Life and Faith* (blog), February 17, 2013, posted on February 19, 2017, found at: <https://mustardseedthoughts.com/2013/02/19/modern-day-parables-21713/>, accessed July 30, 2023.

thirty and fifty parables taught by Jesus.<sup>2</sup> I really enjoy hearing ‘modern’ parables such as this one. See if you can discern its lesson.

*One night four college students were out partying late and didn't study for an exam scheduled the next day. In the morning, they concocted a plan. They made themselves look dirty and disheveled with grease and dirt. Then they went to the Dean and lamented they attended a wedding the previous night and on their way back the tire of their car burst. They explained that they had to push the car all the way back. So, of course, they were in no condition to take the exam. The Dean thought for a minute and said they can take the exam in three days. They thanked him and said they would be ready by that time. On the third day, they appeared before the Dean. The Dean instructed all four to sit in separate classrooms for the exam. They all agreed as they had prepared well in the last three days. The exam consisted of only two questions with the total of one-hundred points:*

1) Your Name? \_\_\_\_\_ (1 Points)

2) Which of the four tires burst? \_\_\_\_\_

*Options – (a) Front Left (b) Front Right (c) Back Left (d) Back Right (99 Points)*

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars often debate whether an example made or a story is parable. For example, the parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus is often debated because there is a specific name associated with a character.

*The moral of the story is: 'Take responsibility or you will learn your lesson.'*<sup>3</sup>

While preparing for today, I struggled with the multiple possible lessons that can be engendered from this morning's parables. I counted five parables. All five parables describe, or rather point to, an aspect of the Kingdom of God. I struggled to discern anything brief and coherent enough to articulate in the short time we have now. To assist, I carried-out a little exercise. Perhaps you can do it with me now. I identified the subject of each parable.

A mustard **seed**

**Yeast** (which is a little itty bity living organism that reproduces asexually)<sup>4</sup>

A **pearl** of great value

All kinds of **fish**

New and old **treasures**

Then, I identified the action performed in each parable.

Took and **planted**

Took and **mixed**

Sold and **bought**

Let down and **caught**

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from:

Dan Western, "The Ten Best Short Moral Stories with Valuable Lessons", *Wealthy Gorilla*, July 24, 2023. Found at: <https://wealthygorilla.com/best-short-moral-stories/>, accessed July 30, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Jesse Sheehan, "What Is Yeast", in Cooking School, *Food Network Kitchen*, July 8, 2021. Found at: <https://www.foodnetwork.com/how-to/packages/food-network-essentials/what-is-yeast>, accessed July 30, 2023.

## **Brought-out**

By disaggregating the subjects and actions from their parables, it became clear to me that one common theme of all these parables is that *'the Kin-dom of God is an inheritance not of our own creation, yet it requires our patient cultivation to be fully realized'*.

All of the churches here and all of the ministers gathered here (and I do not forget our sister, Audrey Walker, and our brother, Matthew Deen, in Newfane) have taught me the lesson that the Kingdom of God is already present, for it is not of our own creation. Yet, it is not **fully** here. We are called as partners in Christ's service to render the kingdom fully visible and experienced by all.

Elisa and Guilford Community Church, at our conference's annual meeting this year I heard the long narrative about your struggle to build the beautiful pavilion for the church and community in Guilford. At Centre, we seek in many ways to emulate in our front lawn that what you have accomplished. I know of the struggles and setbacks the church endured to build that beautiful outdoor house of fellowship. Under the pavilion last month, we saw the Kingdom of God at our Pride Sunday service and I look forward to seeing it again in September when the interfaith youth initiative will be launched. There have always been youth and

queers. Yet, it is your church that brings their indispensable gifts of the spirit into our world. Elisa and Guilford UCC, well done, good and faithful servants.

Jeremy and First Congregational Church in West Brattleboro, you are our mother church. At Centre, we are the fruit of your womb. So, how can we not look to you in partnership when discerning the meaning of Jesus' parables? Together with the Dummerston church, we worked to welcome the Masoudi family from Afghanistan – who existed before our partnership, yet – who through our partnership are now living to their fullest God-given potentials. Jeremy, last year you were ordained. Your path to ordination was undulating and circuitous. Yet, you were patient and faithful, you have found your place, and you enrich all with whom you relate. The gifts of ministry are within you and always have been. Yet, through education and hard work as a lay minister, you have been called to be ordained, not by one church, but two! Jeremy and West Brattleboro UCC, well done, good and faithful servants.

Shawn. Shawn, apples (and strawberries) exist. Whether cultivated by workers or in the wild, they are God's creation. Yet, through much planning, cooperation, baking, and advertising, the Dummerston church is instrumental in the creation of an iconic annual event that produces far more than pies. The apple pie festival (along with its smaller strawberry festival) foster fellowship, goodwill,

positive culture, nutrition, and, what really is simply, a celebration of life and all that is good and right with the world. You have taken God's gift and more fully shared it with us. Shawn, the love of Christ has always existed in our Association's fellowship, since 1797, as researched by the esteemed Reverend Dr Larrimore Crockett.<sup>5</sup> Yet, your gentle, loving, kind, and patient pastoral demeanor created for all the clergy therein a greater sense of belonging and fellowship. I pray to emulate you and thus foster the same upon my return in November. Shawn and Dummerston UCC, Well done, good and faithful servants.

The lessons of the five parables are clear to me in the ministries of our three churches and the examples set forth by their ministers. *'The Kin-dom of God is an inheritance not of our own creation, yet it requires our patient cultivation to be fully realized'*.<sup>6</sup> So to Centre Congregational Church, upon my departure, take this 27-page report, a document in-part crafted from the beautiful leadership of Bob Pu, April Harkness, and the Partners for Sacred Places and envision a path forward for the Kin-dom of God on Main Street! What will it look like? Who will it serve? What part will you play? While it is true that the Kin-dom of God is already

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<sup>5</sup> Larrimore Crockett, "Elijah Wollage and the Formation of the Windham Association of Churches, unpublished paper presented at the 225<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Windham-Union Association of Churches, United Church of Christ, Dummerston Congregational Church, UCC, November, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> The thesis of this message is in part inspired by:

Cheryl Lindsay, "Seeds for Righteousness: Sunday, July 30, 2023", *Worship Ways*, United Church of Christ, found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-for-righteousness/>, accessed July 30, 2023.

present, for I sense it now in this very sanctuary with all of you, it requires patient nurturing to be further realized. I look forward to more fully experiencing the Kingdom of God with you upon my return in November.

This was the Word of God. And it was spoken to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".