
The gift of belonging
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Ephesians 2:14-22 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

I'm sure that all of you now expect a calm, rational, deeply theological explication of the gospel story we just heard. The series of analogies between the kingdom of heaven and ... a bunch of seemingly unrelated items.

With very little context, rapid-fire, in the gospel of Matthew the kingdom of heaven is compared to:

[image: list below]

- A mustard seed.
- Yeast.
- A hidden treasure.
- A pearl of great value.
- A very effective fishing net.

What do you think of those comparisons? Does that list seem a bit ... strange ... to you? If we fixate on the items in questions, then yes, the story does seem a bit strange. In fact, we may be thinking that if the kingdom of heaven is like those objects ... perhaps we'd rather go somewhere else.

It's very natural for us to fixate on the list of items. Perhaps each of us are already imagining which one of those items we might get our hands on most easily.

But if we read the story just a bit more carefully, we come to see that the analogy to the kingdom of heaven is not actually to these items. But rather, the items as they are put into action.

For example the kingdom of heaven is not compared to a mustard seed. It is compared to a mustard seed that is planted, watered, tended to that over time develops into a tree that birds can rest in. The kingdom of heaven is not compared to yeast. It is compared to yeast that a person takes and mixes with flour until all of the flour is leavened.

The analogies to the kingdom of heaven are not to inanimate objects. The analogies to the kingdom of heaven are to action, commitment, hope, and taking risks. Risks you say? What risks? Think about the person who found one pearl of great value and sold all that they had to acquire it. Now imagine they discover that the pearl they purchased is actually a fake. The kingdom of heaven involves risks. Or at least, the pursuit of the kingdom of heaven involves taking risks.

The kingdom of heaven is that place where we invest our time, energy, money, and even our affections. The items are not important. It is our investment in the project where we find the kingdom of heaven.

[image: sleeping in hammock]

Well that is all very unfortunate. Because this is mid-summer, and I'm sure the last thing you want me to talk about is how we have to be active and more invested. You don't want to hear me drone on about action when we all just want to sit back hiding from the heat and keeping cool. Don't worry, I feel you on that.

[image: mustard seed]

So perhaps if we restrict ourselves to just the mustard seed, we can have a message that will not upset our summer ease. I'm sure we have all heard sermons where the main idea behind the mustard seed analogy is that small and seemingly insignificant things can grow into things that are substantial and significant. We get to do something small and over time that can become significant. And that is a nice message that demands nothing from us. Perhaps that is a good summer message.

But I think that message under-sells the story. I suggest that the point of the mustard seed analogy is NOT simply that small things can grow. In the story, the seed grows so that birds can find a place to rest. Growth is not a good thing "just because". Growth is good because it enables others to benefit. Like a bird that can find a place of safety and rest.

[image: bird nesting in a mop head]

That is why I selected this image for this week.

Here we see a bird resting in a somewhat unusual place. An inverted mop head. Presumably the owner of the mop placed it on their balcony so that it would dry out. But

a bird took advantage of the space. Added some twigs, and created a safe place to create a nest. The bird just saw a place to nest, and then created her nest there. The owner of the mop did not intentionally place the mop where it would become a nest. It just happened. And nobody plants mustard seeds in order to provide shelter for birds. But it happens. Things like that happen all the time actually.

In fact, historically, mops were developed the same way. Early mops were usually made at home, using worn out clothing, bedsheets, or other items. Some mops were made out of ropes that had worn out. Mops themselves are examples of recycling. So it is very fitting that birds feel free to recycle mops into nests.

Given all that ... what - exactly - is the kingdom of heaven being compared to in our reading? Or more to the point, what do those comparisons say about the nature of the kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom of heaven is also compared to a treasure, and a pearl of great value. “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in their joy they go and sell all that they have and buy that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, they went and sold all that they had and bought it.”

I confess these metaphors sort of leave me a bit cold. On the surface the reading is about how only wealthy people can actually find the kingdom of heaven. We have all heard countless sermons that speak to the idea that the kingdom of heaven is so valuable that we should make every possible sacrifice for that kingdom.

But again, I think that message under-sells the story. Because both of those examples - buying a valuable treasure and buying a pearl of great value only make sense in an individualistic way.

What do you think? Is the concept of the kingdom of heaven an individualistic concept? For me, that makes no sense. I don’t care how nice your image of the kingdom of heaven is - if each of us ended up there - all alone - that would be terrible. The word “kingdom” implies community, space for not only us but our friends, our families.

So perhaps the metaphor for buying treasure works, but in a collective way. Because creating community also has costs. To create open, engaging community we

need to pay a price. The person entering into the community can come in for free. But the community itself has to pay a price in order to be welcoming. Community has to pay a cost called “giving up a bit of control”. Being open to strangers in our midst means that we have to loosen our sense of control - just a bit.

As we just read in Ephesians, “Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through them both of us have access in one Spirit to God. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God”

Ephesians speaks to a wall that once divided people coming down. “Jesus has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. Jesus abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God”

When the book of Ephesians was written, the two groups in question were Jewish followers of Jesus and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. So when we read this story today we are invited to consider what barriers are affecting us today? In what ways do we separate people today? And are those barriers actually helpful to us?

Mary Ellen and I have been going through some office documents, and deciding what material should go to the United Church archives. And I’ve learned a bit of our history. And what I have learned is that Chapel in the Park has always been a place with a passion for taking down barriers.

[image: Thorncliffe in 1956]

[image: Thorncliffe in 1966]

In the very early days, Thorncliffe Park had just been converted from a racetrack to an apartment-only community. And at the time, that was seen as a barrier to churches. Because the traditional Parish was defined by a geographic area where you could actually go and knock on people’s doors. An apartment-only community was a new reality.

Chapel in the Park responded by listening to the needs of the community, and responding to those needs. At one point we helped create - under the driving force of our minister, Rev Michael Quiggin - the “Thorncliffe Information Post”. A hub for sharing

information about the community, among other things. A role that TNO fills today.

As one of the first churches in the neighbourhood we broke down denominational barriers, providing space not only for Roman Catholic services but also for weekly Anglican services. And our relationship with the Roman Catholic community - through St. Edith Stein Roman Catholic Church - continues even today. And I join a long list of ministers who see them as partners, not just renters.

And today - we have the opportunity to break down other barriers. We are very uniquely situated as a United Church planted in what has become a predominatntly Muslim community. That reality is - in Canada - a rare gift.

So let's broaden this conversation. I think what we are talking about - in modern language - is the concept we call "belonging".

[image: bird in mop]

Who needs belonging? We all do. You. Me. Them. Everybody. Everybody!
What is belonging?

[image: belonging - othering and belonging institute]

According to the "Othering and Belonging Institute", "Belonging is a powerful vision for creating a world where every person is seen, valued, and empowered - a world where each individual's humanity is recognized and celebrated, and the planet itself included in the circle of human concern. If ever there was a time to double down on building this world, it is now."

What do you think of that definition. To me, it's a definition that paints with too broad a brush. Declaring what belonging looks like for all people even though the definition appears to be written by people of privilege. And I suppose that is not surprising. The "Othering and Belonging Institute", was founded in 2010 as a UC Berkeley Institute. Clearly written by people of wealth. Clearly written by a committee. Clearly written by academics.

But I share the definition as a starting point - because I agree with the focus. And I believe that a world that values belonging will be created - one community at a time. Starting with each of our own communities. And in fact, starting with each one of us.

Believe it or not, researchers have actually studied belonging. Obviously there are

many cultural overtones to what belonging means. But some observations seem universal. One person who has studied belonging is Brené Brown. I want to share one of her teachings.

Let me start with a question. What is belonging? And I want to get there with another question. The question, what is the opposite of belonging? Many people will say that the opposite of belonging is feeling isolated and lonely. But Brown's research demonstrates that the opposite of "belonging" is actually "fitting in". Fitting in is when we come into a group of people and we decide - ok - what do I need to say, how do I need to act, what clothes do I need to wear in order to fit in. Fitting in mean that I am willing to pretend to be someone else in order to not rock the boat. Fitting in is about us choosing to change - at least our outward expression - in order to be accepted into a group.

But belonging never asks us to change who we are. Brown put it this way:
[image: belonging - brené brown]

"True belonging does not require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are."

This is a two-way street. Because we cannot belong anywhere until we belong to ourselves first. Belonging requires self-knowledge. Which is harder than it sounds. To quote Brown, "Belonging is not about having a seat at the table. It's about showing up as I really am whether there is a seat for me or not." Belonging demands that we are willing to be ourselves even if it means risking being shunned and not accepted by the group.

Belonging is not always easy. We have to risk being alone in order to be who we are.

[image: bird in mop]

Churches can be places that we can find belonging. And church is sort of special too. Over the years I have belonged to a number of groups. But most of them - from Costco to the Y to a union - required that I showed up with my credit card in hand. Many groups we might belong to require us to pay to play. But church is one place where we are all free to simply walk in the door and find community. We are all free to walk in the door and find belonging.

Finding belonging is beneficial for our emotional and spiritual well-being. It is

about finding dignity in our own lives. It is about knowing that you belong somewhere. It is about knowing that there is some space that you belong. Some space that - when you are not there - you are missed. Some space that you can be yourself.

In Ephesians it said that Jesus has broken down the wall that divides us from each other. Sadly, in the last 2000 years new wall have been constructed. But the invitation from Jesus persists. And we can find belonging as we ourselves contribute to taking down the walls that separate us from each other.

What walls do you want to take down in your own life? What walls in society to you want to help take down?

Belonging is a gift. A gift that we all deserve.

Amen.