

The Kingdom Under Your Nose

July 26, 2026

When Scott and I got married, one of the special little “extra touches” that I did was I printed out quotes about love on card stock and placed them in random spots around the church hall where we had our reception. There were quotes from Shakespeare and John Keats, as well as Star Wars and Mr. Rogers. Out of them all, there’s only one that I displayed in our house after we got home from our honeymoon. Slipped between the frame and the mirror on our dresser is a quote from Johnny Cash, who, when asked what God’s kingdom was like, said, “This morning, with her, over coffee.”

God’s kingdom is in the details, in the small acts of our lives that shape us.

Several years ago, I preached on these same parables, and I ended with homework. I asked the congregation I was serving at the time to send me pictures of where they had encountered the kingdom of God—not church buildings, not stained glass, not crosses—just ordinary places where you suddenly caught a glimpse that God was at work.

I remember thinking it might be a hard assignment. Instead, my inbox filled up. Folks sent pictures of gardens, of grandchildren, of meals shared with neighbors, of sunsets and hospital rooms. I got pictures of volunteers serving dinner at the shelter and hands folded around a coffee mug during a difficult conversation. It turns out people are actually pretty good at recognizing the kingdom once they start looking for it. It also turns out that no two people sent me the same thing...and maybe that’s why Jesus is surprisingly reluctant to define it.

Notice what he doesn’t say. He never says, “The kingdom of heaven is...” Instead, he says, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” It’s like a mustard seed. It’s like yeast. It’s like treasure hidden in a field. It’s like a merchant searching for pearls. It’s like a fishing net. Over and over again, Jesus reaches for another metaphor. It’s almost as though he knows one image won’t work for everyone.

A colleague of mine once compared it to trying to understand a rap song her teenage grandson had created. She couldn’t understand a word. So, she asked for the lyrics on paper. Suddenly the whole thing made sense.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is handing us sheet after sheet of paper.

- Didn’t get it with agriculture? Let’s try baking.
- Didn’t get it with baking? Let’s try real estate.
- Didn’t get it with real estate? Let’s go fishing.

He keeps translating because he wants it to land. The kingdom is too important to leave misunderstood.

But here’s what fascinates me. All of these stories have something in common. They’re about things that are hidden. The seed disappears into the ground. The yeast disappears into the dough. The treasure is buried. The pearl has to be searched for. The fish are beneath the water. Nothing flashy. Nothing obvious.

Nothing that would ever make the evening news. The kingdom of God seems to have a preference for operating quietly. And that can be frustrating. Because, and I suspect you're like me, when I pray for God to fix this world, I tend to hope for something dramatic. I want fireworks. I want headlines. I want unmistakable miracles. Instead, Jesus gives us gardening and baking.

All summer, my six-year-old daughter has been rescuing ladybugs when we go swimming. Not just scooping them out. She patiently coaxes them to walk. She finds them a shady place to recover. She brings them tiny drops of water because, she says, "They must be thirsty after all that swimming."

Honestly, I don't know whether saving one ladybug changes the world. But I do know it has changed me. Watching her has slowed me down. It's reminded me to notice, to remember that every living thing belongs to God before it belongs to anyone else. And after the police shooting in Madison this week, after another life was violently taken, after another family was shattered, it may seem almost naïve to stand here talking about ladybugs.

The problems before us are enormous. What difference can one act of kindness possibly make?

Jesus' answer seems to be, "More than you know."

Friends, I'd like to suggest today that the genius of these kingdom parables that Jesus is preaching today is that every small act reveals something massive. Every time we practice seeing something tiny as sacred, we are training ourselves to recognize the sacred everywhere. Every time we choose patience instead of irritation, welcome instead of suspicion, compassion instead of indifference, we are strengthening muscles we will need when the stakes are much, much higher. Through our micro-behaviors, we're becoming the sort of people who instinctively ask, "How can I protect life?" instead of, "How can I eliminate what I fear?" You see, small acts don't merely solve little problems. They form little people, and big people for that matter, into kingdom people.

One of our church neighbors harassed one of our Blessing Box volunteers this week, telling her it is attracting drug dealers and unhoused people to the neighborhood. Rather than being about the healing of the world, about seeing the divine in every being, he chose to lash out. The kingdom parables tell us that his aggression is rooted in smaller attitudes and behaviors that have mushroomed over time. It would be tempting for me to lash out at him. Send a strongly worded, condescending email to him, chastising him for his callousness. But Jesus has me preaching about the kingdom this week, and so rather than lashing out with self-righteousness, I'll be taking a page out of the JOSHUA / community organizing playbook, and inviting him to coffee, trying to learn more about him as a person, to break down the walls between us.

You see, this is where these parables become really interesting. Most of us have heard that the mustard seed represents something tiny becoming enormous. That's true. But that's not the whole story. Mustard wasn't a prized garden plant. It was closer to an invasive weed, not exactly the garlic mustard of our day, but close enough. No respectable gardener would intentionally plant it. Once it gets into your garden it spreads. You can't contain it. Likewise yeast. For much of Scripture, yeast is actually a symbol of contamination. It gets into everything. It changes everything.

Jesus chooses two images his listeners would have considered unwanted, uncontrollable, even a little suspicious. In other words, the kingdom doesn't politely stay in one corner of your life. It invades. It spreads. It works itself into every relationship, every habit, every purchase, every vote, every conversation, every assumption, every corner of your heart. The kingdom doesn't visit. It moves in.

By definition, a kingdom is simply the place where someone's will gets done. The kingdom of God, then, is wherever Jesus' way of seeing and loving shapes what happens. Not just in church, but in kitchens, at school, in board meetings, in hospital rooms, at the grocery store, and at the neighborhood pool where one little girl decides a ladybug is worth rescuing.

Because that's where kingdoms actually grow. Not primarily through grand speeches on primetime T.V., but through habits, through the things we do over and over until they become the people we are. Because the people we are create the kind of world we live in.

Psalm 119 says, "My eyes shed streams of tears because your law is not kept." That's not the complaint of someone obsessed with rules. It's the grief of someone who knows there is another way to live. Someone who understands the ways of God and aches because the world keeps settling for less. I think Jesus aches that way too. But notice what he does. He doesn't respond to violence with violence. He doesn't answer fear with fear. He plants seeds. He tells stories. He bakes bread. He heals people. He notices children. He eats with outsiders. He LIVES the kingdom until other people begin catching it. Like yeast.

So here's your homework. Fifteen years ago I asked a congregation to send me pictures of where they saw the kingdom. Now I'm inviting you into that same practice. Take a picture, not necessarily of something beautiful, but of where you catch the kingdom breaking in. Maybe it's someone helping a stranger. Maybe it's tomatoes ripening in your garden. Maybe it's bubbles floating through the park (because I've never met anyone who doesn't smile at bubbles.) Maybe it's someone sitting quietly with a grieving friend. Maybe it's your dog waiting faithfully by the door. Maybe it's a ladybug. Maybe it's a full Blessing Box, ready to feed hungry people.

Print them out and post them on our Wonder Wall upstairs in the church hall or send them to Eric in the church office to print. Let's fill our bulletin board, and maybe eventually create the need for more, with reminders that God's kingdom is not absent. It's growing, already among us. Because if Jesus is right, and I believe he is, the kingdom has never depended on spectacular beginnings. It has always been found in things everyone else thought were too small to matter.

Friends, that's still how God is changing the world—one rescued ladybug, one can of soup, one act of mercy, one transformed heart—until, before we even realize it, the whole world begins to rise.

May it be so. Alleluia and amen!

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Psalm 119:129-136; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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