

Title: Not Just a Noun

Date: 7/30/2023 (Proper 12, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Genesis 29:15-28](#); [Psalm 105:1-11, 45b](#); [Romans 8:26-39](#); [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52](#)

Video Link: [https://youtu.be/DWHouXj7L5w?si=vL2RyqL3Bg62b\\_hk&t=1330](https://youtu.be/DWHouXj7L5w?si=vL2RyqL3Bg62b_hk&t=1330)

In the words of today's Psalmist:

We give you thanks, O God, and call upon your name;  
we make known your deeds among the peoples.

We search for you and your strength,  
and we continue to seek your face (Ps 105:1,4<sup>1</sup>)

Amen.

In today's gospel there are five, count them FIVE parables. Before we have barely processed one, we get another. And the RANGE!

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

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast...

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure...

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant...

The kingdom of heaven is like a net...

This translates directly into the names we give these parables. This is the "Parable of the <insert opening noun here>." The only exception is the fourth one, which tends to be called "The Parable of the Pearl." Still a noun, just not the noun at the very beginning.

What did we learn about nouns in elementary school?

According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, a noun is defined as "a word that refers to a person, a place, or a thing, a quality or an activity."<sup>2</sup> It can be the subject of the sentence, or the object.

A noun is concrete. A noun is discrete. It is separate and distinct from other nouns. It has clear borders and boundaries so we can point to it and say, "That is...this person, place or thing, this quality or activity." Ending the title of the parable with a noun puts it in a neat little box.

In Godly Play, the Montessori-based method we use as our curriculum for Sunday school, parables come in a gold box. The storyteller walks over to the story, takes it off the shelf, brings it to the circle of children, and begins by telling them.

"Look. The box is the color gold. There may be a parable inside because parables are as valuable, or even valuable, than gold.

The box also looks like a present. Parables are presents. They were given to you before you were born. They are yours, even if you don't know what they are.

Do you see the lid? It is like a closed door. Sometime parables seem closed to us, even if we are ready to enter them. You need to keep coming back to them, and one day they will open.

I know. Let's look inside and see if there's a parable there."<sup>3</sup>

The names of parables are often used as a shorthand, as a sign that points to the conclusion of the story, the lesson that Jesus wants us to take with us, neatly packaged in a box. But maybe we should see these titles as an invitation.

After all, they come to us from the beginning of the story, not the end.

After all, a noun just kind of hangs there in midair. A noun all by itself doesn't make a full sentence. It's not only the subject; it's the subject taking an action. It's not only the object; it's the object that is being acted on. All of these nouns go on some kind of journey or transformation in these parables.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field...

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour...

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid...

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls...

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind...

Some of these parables are short, and some are a bit longer. And in each one of them, we start with the idea of a kingdom. A kingdom is something concrete, something discrete. It's something we think of as having boundaries, even if those boundaries aren't drawn by God but by human beings. It's like something enclosed in a box.

Yet Jesus invites us to open the lid. In Godly Play, we take the parable out of the box so that we can look at it more closely, so that it can bring us somewhere else. As we listen to the parables, we too are invited to see the kingdom as something in motion, something that is acting or being acted on.

When we are focused on the parable as a noun. We can end up focusing on the wrong thing.

For example, we can get into an extended discussion about mustard seeds.

Are they really the smallest of all seeds?

Do they really grow into the greatest of shrubs?

How tall does a shrub have to be to be considered a tree?

Do birds really nest in mustard shrubs, mustard trees?

The gospels according to Mark, Matthew and Luke each have a different version of this parable, do we need to decide which is the one true version before we can even try to understand it?

In some cases, it **is** helpful to get some clarity on these nouns.

For example, the yeast in this parable looks more like a sourdough starter than the yellow packets of instant yeast that I use in my baking. And three measures of flour aren't equal to three cups of flour; it's somewhere between forty and sixty **pounds** of flour.<sup>4</sup> She's not just making one loaf of bread, she's making a many many MANY loaves of bread.

Talking about sourdough starters also takes me back to the pandemic. How many of you had sourdough starters? How many of you shared your starters? One of my favorite pandemic stories is people in San Francisco sharing their sourdough starters by putting them on telephone poles and trees.<sup>5</sup>

During the pandemic I served a church in Chicago. Going into the fall of 2020, parents didn't feel safe about bringing their kids to church. So, the children's minister decided that we'd use the gym, which had high ceilings and open windows.

We drew boxes six feet apart from each other so each family unit could sit together and still be at a distance from other families. Instead of the usual Sunday morning lessons, we'd focus on one parable each Sunday. Instead of one of us telling the story, we were going to walk up and down the center of the gym and make this more of a conversation. We also asked everyone, children and parents, to act out the parable.

This is a very tangible way to embody these parables, to give these words and this narrative tangible form.

And I loved the way children took to this. Imagine a child curled up on the floor as a mustard seed, and then slowly, slowly, unfurling themselves until they are standing, until they are the greatest of shrubs, arms weighed down by trees. Will you try this?

(Close your eyes. Well, first check far apart you are from your neighbor, then close your eyes.

You are a mustard seed.

You are the smallest of all the seeds.

Someone has picked you up and planted you in their field.

They covered you with dirt and poured some water over you.

You start growing.

First you become a seedling, then you grow branches, then flowers, then berries.

Feel the birds land on you, and assemble nests in your branches.

They lay eggs and sit on them.

Watch as the baby birds hatch and grow and take their first flight.)

This whole story, that whole arc of being planted and growing and looking beyond yourself, THIS is the kingdom of heaven. It can't be contained; we can't put it in a box. It is alive and in motion, undergoing transformation. And none of this happens in isolation.

This whole story, the words in this story and in other version of this story, and the empty spaces between the words, point us toward the kingdom of heaven, toward this arc of becoming.

In my last church, every Sunday we would say some variation of:  
Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here, as you are, to receive the word of God and to hear the call of God, today and every day.

And so, when we started talking about racism or climate change or immigration or anything that asked people to have hard conversations and go to uncomfortable places, someone would point to that statement and say, "But you said God welcomes me as I am. Why do I need to change?"

Yes, God loves each one of you as you are. Your gifts and flaws, your flaws that you see as your gifts AND your gifts that you see as flaws. AND God also wants more for you; a yoke that lightens your burdens, a sense of having more than enough to share, a turning back to and growing toward God.

The kingdom of heaven isn't a fixed point; it doesn't stay in the box. It is an ever-moving destination. On the one hand, that can be frustrating because it'd be nice just to get there, to pat ourselves on the back for a good job well done. The End.

But living as if the kingdom of heaven is here isn't about being done or getting it right. It isn't about being clever, like Jacob, because the trickster oriented toward trickery will be tricked by someone just a step ahead of them.

So, what does it mean to live as if the Kingdom of Heaven is already here, within us, between us, just beyond the corner of our eyes?

Perhaps these parables show us where and how.

The Kingdom of Heaven is in the everyday.

It's in planting seeds.

It's in folding the yeast into the flour, injecting a catalyst of compassion and turning toward God in everything we do.

It's in casting widely our nets of love. We are not called to separate what we catch, to set aside the good and throw out the bad, but to help bring everyone and everything together closer to where we have found God.

It's in recognizing something of great value and devoting all of ourselves, our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies to it.

It's a mystery, a present in a golden box,  
waiting for us to open it,  
to receive the word of God and hear the call of God  
so that nothing and no one  
will **ever** be separated from  
the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The Saint Helena Psalter

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/noun>

<sup>3</sup> <https://stpetersef.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Parable-of-the-Sower.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Short Stories by Jesus. P132

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sfgate.com/food/article/sourdough-starter-trades-neighborhood-SF-15175164.php>