

If you wanted to farm a field, or plant a garden, and have that field or garden produce good results, most people would tell you there needs to be order: straight rows of crops, properly distanced, with seeds measured and applied with precision. There are instructions on those seed packets for a reason!

If you wanted to prepare a healthy meal, most people would tell you that clean hands, and a clean surface, and fresh produce and ingredients are a good place to start.

If you wanted to make a sound, secure financial investment, or purchase a piece of property, most people would tell you to find someone with credentials, and with a reputation of being trustworthy.

If you wanted to purchase a string of pearls for that special someone, most people would encourage you to find a vendor with a high rating from the Better Business Bureau.

Jesus the farmer says, "Can I interest you in a weed? Oh sure, you might think it's useless, only good for staining white shirts, and flavoring your soft pretzels, or occupying too much space for too long in the side door of your refrigerator. And sure, you like plants that do what they are told, not ones that grow at their own discretion, tangling everything in their wake, and growing bigger and faster than Audrey II in Little Shop of Horrors. But trust me, this little seed's a keeper."

Jesus the baker says, "How about a little yeast? Oh sure, it's the discards, the spoiled, left-over bread. It's not clean. And if you don't handle it just right, it can be both dangerous and worthless. And even if you do handle it right, it's gonna take a lot work to get where it needs to be. But trust me, this yeast has got potential."

Jesus the investor says, "Have I got a deal for you! I know a guy. He's unconventional. Some might even say he pushes the limits of legality, but he's good. He'll find that perfect piece of property for you!"

Jesus the bargain-hunter says, “You might think I am crazy, but if you’re looking for an engagement ring, you gotta go to that place that also doubles as a bowling alley and a lion-taming academy. Quality stones, quality service, good people!”

The kingdom of heaven is a reclamation project – God takes what the world is too quick to discard, and transforms worldly scraps into divine plenty. A pesky mustard seed, something too small to even see, can grow into a large bush that will provide shade for a whole ecosystem. Yeast, a spoiled, smelly, unclean substance, and not much of it, can make enough bread to feed a banquet. And speculators and merchants, the kind of folk that trespass to find buried treasure, or go deep into the seedy underbellies of illegal markets to find rare items, and the kind of folk that always seem to be bound to reeling in the next big fish, find treasures and pearls so fulfilling they quit the game altogether.

We keep expecting the kingdom of heaven to be delivered to us in an Amazon package, approved for us by those who fit the bill of church-goers, ordered in the same way our social systems are governed and maintained, doled out to us with the regularity, efficiency, and certainty of a pension fund.

But Jesus tells us the kingdom of heaven isn’t shiny, and it isn’t predictable, and it sure isn’t sensible. It’s messy. It’s actually the messiness that’s all around us. Jesus illustrates the nearness of kingdom-living, by taking all of the ordinary messiness around him, and inviting others to see God working in the messiness.

It’s also worth mentioning that mustard seeds, and yeast, and speculators, and merchants are troublemakers, maybe even the good kind that John Lewis used to speak of. I have an image in my mind of rows and rows of long church pews, filled with people sitting rigidly, all dressed predictably, all captive to their worship force-fields, all speaking in unison, convinced that their conformity, and righteousness, and precision will bring about God’s reign. And in their midst, I see some troublemakers. There’s a fellow in a mustard-colored shirt who sits when everyone stands, and stands when everyone sits, and he does it with pizzazz, and confidence, and grace. And there’s another, who looks a bit disheveled, unshowered, hair uncombed, and a dozen shirt-tails hanging out, if that’s even possible, and yet his piety is captivating. There’s another congregant a few rows back: she’s offering executive summaries of the service to help expedite the

process; she sees the stagnant nature of her peers, and she wants to help them break through all the complexities and layers, and get back to God's simplicity. Still another woman, a few rows further back, holds a protest placard: *Start Being Church Again!* She will persist until she provokes action.

Sardis Baptist Church, if we're gonna be the church that illumines the closeness of God's kingdom, we've got to stop credentialing the ordered and predictable, and we've got to start credentialing the pesky, and the provocative, and the eccentric, and the odd, and the weird...the wonderful, awkward, real, authentic people, and places, and things among us. We've gotta see beauty in weeds; we've gotta get our hands dirty even when the world tells us it's not a good idea; we've gotta believe in a barter system that isn't concerned with short straws.

And what that might look like? Maybe it's a willingness to be moved by the spirit via worship produced in the makeshift studio of a ten-year-old iPhone. Maybe it's a willingness to see uncomfortable protest, especially the type that threatens our privilege, and that grows in disorderly fashion, as an agent that can provide long-term shelter and sustenance. Maybe it's a willingness to believe that it's the spirit of God's people, not the look, form, or systems of God's people that illumine kingdom-living. Maybe it's an acknowledgement that when we proclaim the Lordship of Christ, and the Easter resurrection, and the witness of our saints, we also buy into God's potential, and indeed God's desire, to breathe life-giving, soul-changing, heart-moving transformation into the people, places, and things we too often deem ordinary, and unremarkable, and unredeemable.

Our lection ends with a catch of fish. And because Matthew is Matthew, we also have to hear about how those fish are gonna be sorted: good ones and bad ones. I hope the first four parables aren't lost on you. If we were to read the sorting part first, we might assume there was lots of bad stuff in the world. But so far, weeds, and yeast, and merchants, and retailers, troublemakers if you will, have been placed in good baskets. Perhaps the kingdom is near, when we choose to claim our neighbors, even the troublemakers, instead of seeking to sort them. We do, after all, belong to a Maker who has shown a patience, and a grace, and goodness, and a determination to teach us how to farm, and how to cook, and how to procure what is good. May we have ears to listen, and eyes to see, and hands and feet to follow. Amen.