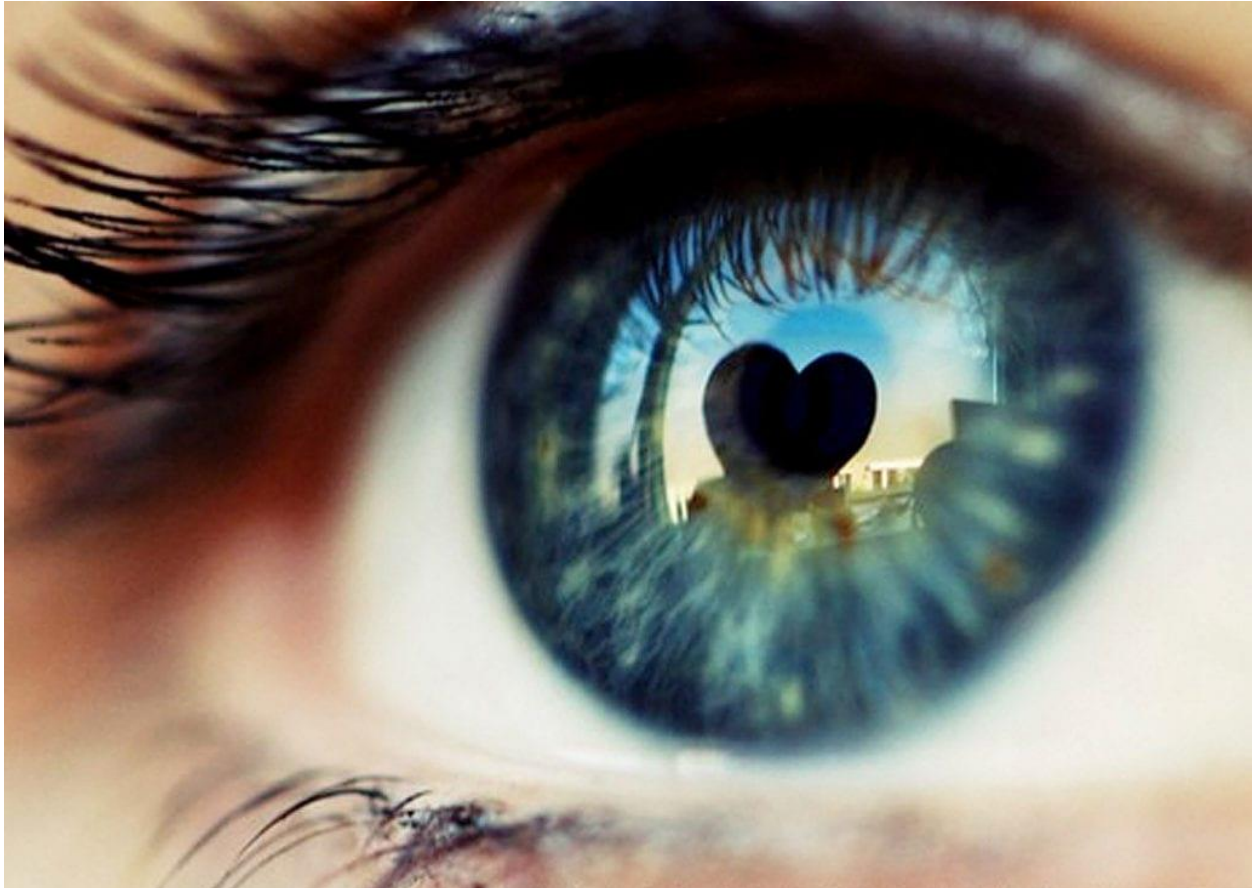


July 30, 2023
“A New Way of Seeing: Hidden Grace”
Romans 8:31-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45
Rev. Amy Wood, Associate Pastor



Over the last few weeks, we have been taking a look at a New Way of Seeing- looking through different lenses at some of the parables of Jesus. Pastor Nikki began with what's often called the parable of the Sower, and she encouraged us to think about those who have cultivated the soils of our lives to help our hearts prepare to receive the seeds of God's grace. Last week, she addressed the parable of the wheat and the weeds, recalling that in this story, Jesus is encouraging us to look on one another with love and welcome, to nurture all, for our roots are bound up together, and God is the only one who can separate the two.

And, I have to tell you that I am so thankful that she covered the parables about the plants and the soil because I am terrible at growing things. But, it's been interesting to think about how we prepare our hearts and lives to receive God's grace, how we pour into others to nourish the seeds that God is planting in their lives.

But, seeds are sometimes hard to see, and they have to be buried, scattered to take root. It's hard to believe the creative power that is contained in one small seed—and they are easily overlooked.

Today, we finish our series by looking through a new lens to discover how we can uncover God's hidden grace in our lives.

Will you pray with me????

Have you ever searched for something, only to find it right in front of you? Maybe you've hunted around for your glasses, only to have someone point out that they've been on the top of your head the whole time? Or, maybe you've been walking around with your cell phone in your hand, looking high and low for where you put that dog gone thing? Or, you've gone through a drawer, certain that what you are looking for isn't there, only to have a family member open the drawer and pull out exactly what you were looking for? My family had a saying for that—my grandma would always say, "If it had been a snake, it would have bit ya!"

Last week, my family got to play a wild game of hide n seek while we were on vacation. My son, Joshua, who has autism and is non-verbal, likes things to be in order. So, when he found a bag in his grandparents closet on vacation, he was trying to be helpful and put the box inside away so that he could use the bag to pack up his videos. Problem was- that the box contained a bracelet that my Dad had just bought my mom, and no one had any idea where to look for it. Now, remember that Joshua doesn't talk- so it's not as easy as asking him where he put it. I quizzed my parents and tried to figure out what the box looked like. They described a small white cardboard jewelry box. So, I pulled up a picture of a similar box on Google, showed it to Joshua and asked him to show me where it was. He seemed confused, and just led me across the room. Next, I tried to show him the empty bag, and he led me to a dresser where I found the receipt, but not the box. I probably asked him 15 times, but he had no idea what I wanted. And we started searching the house. We looked for over an hour. I went through trash, my dad went through recycling. There were 6 of us looking, and we opened every drawer and cabinet in the house. That box was no where to be found. We checked, double checked, and tripled checked places. Finally, I opened one of the cabinets that my younger son, Daniel, had checked and there I saw a brown box that looked a lot like one that jewelry would come in. It wasn't the white box that we were searching for, but maybe, just maybe.... And, sure enough- there was the bracelet, still in the box Problem was- we were searching for a white box when it was in a brown box the whole time.

Why do we have so much trouble seeing what is right in front of our eyes, even when we are searching for it? Maybe it's because we are busy or because we don't expect to find it or maybe because it looks different than we anticipate? We don't do this just with things, we do this with God's grace. as well.—God's grace is love that we don't earn- it's a free gift, like treasure found in a field. Often, we look all over for it, wondering where God is in the midst of our lives, only to realize that God's grace and love have been there the whole time, sometimes packaged in surprising ways- ways we never expected, packaged in the small, ordinary ways of life. Being a little less than 5 feet tall, I like to remind people that great things come in small packages....

All kidding aside... Sometimes, we think that a great big God should be doing great big things. We think of the time when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, or when he led the Israelites to freedom by being a pillar of smoke by day and a fire by night. We might think of the time at Jesus' baptism when the heavens opened and the dove descended and God's voice was heard saying, "this is my Son, my beloved,

in Him I am well pleased.” We want to hear the booming voice, and have the big neon sign, but instead, like Elijah, God doesn’t often come to us in the fire or the hurricane, but in a still small voice.

In our Gospel reading today, I think that Jesus is reminding us that God’s grace, God’s love, most often comes to us in small, more subtle ways, and then grows and becomes a great treasure.

We pick back up today with more parables which are stories that Jesus uses to help us to get a greater understanding of a concept that’s hard to grasp. In this case, Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of heaven and is trying to help us understand the life that God wants us to have.

He begins our passage today saying that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, then, He says, the kingdom of God is like yeast, then... His disciples ask him to go back and explain the parable that He told, like 3 stories ago—they are definitely having trouble keeping up. Jesus goes back and explains the parable of the weeds of the field and then immediately jumps back in—now, explaining that the kingdom of God is a treasure hidden in a field and a pearl of great price. Is your head spinning yet? I know that mine was!

There was a rabbinic teaching method called “charaz.” It means stringing pearls, and the teacher would spin out image after image, wisdom saying after wisdom saying, parable after parable in a seemingly random way. It was designed to tell a larger truth by focusing on small details or to talk about a whole by examining the parts. It was describing a picture by telling of a variety of perspectives.

I am sure that Jesus’ hearers got as frustrated by this style of teaching as we do. “Which is it, Jesus” had to be the demand. Is the kingdom like a pearl or a mustard seed? Is it more like yeast or like a treasure in a field? Do we stumble across it or set out with a checklist to find it? Does it work in secret, hidden away from our eyes like yeast in the dough, or does it sprout up like a plant and provide shade and protection like a mustard shrub? Is it something common like a seed or questionable like yeast or valuable like a treasure?

I think Jesus would just smile and say, “Yes.”

As we look at the parables that Jesus has strung together in this text, we see that Jesus is pointing to the truth that the kingdom of heaven is often hidden- hard to see, but present and powerful, none the less.

God’s grace is hidden and mixed in. It is a mustard seed, a tiny seed that grows into a huge shrub. Or, it’s yeast that when mixed in with wheat comes to life. It’s small, easy to miss, but it is all around us.

So, if God’s grace is all around us but can easily be overlooked like our glasses on our heads, how do we find it? How do we uncover it? How do we celebrate it?

First, we begin by looking with open eyes and hearts. So, often, we are rushing through life, taking the small things for granted, and we miss out on so much! A few weeks ago, I was taking a walk through a park near my house. I had decided that night that I just wanted to walk- no dog, no headphones, I just wanted to hear the birds sing and the wind rustle through the trees. As I was walking along the path, just feet away, I saw a deer. It was staring at me through the foliage. Of course, I stopped and whipped out my camera and you can probably see a picture on the screen today. Only a few hundred yards in front of me, another family had walked by, chatting and walking their dog, and they never saw the doe standing there. As I stood looking into the woods, a couple rode by on their bikes and never turned their heads. They missed it too. For me, it was a reminder of the wonder of God’s creation, of God in our midst, and it made me think, how many times do we get so distracted that we miss moments like that? How often do we just rush through life with our heads down and miss seeing God’s grace at work? How often do we truly stop and think, where have I seen, or sensed God’s presence in my life lately?

So, the first step to seeing God's grace, which may be hidden, is to look intentionally for it- to search for it, to expect to see it.

This can take practice. That's a word that we've used a lot lately, isn't it? It takes practice to see God in our midst- and, the more we practice, the better we get at it. The more we look, the more we see. Did you ever notice that the more you look for something, the more aware you become of it? Once you see/notice one sunflower or butterfly or bird, you begin to notice a ton of them, everywhere you go. That's why it's important to practice seeing God, to train our eyes to spot ways that God is with us. In Vacation Bible School, we call these God-Sightings and each night, we asked the kids to talk about where they saw God. Many mentioned nature or their families. In fact, I once had a child answer, "bioluminescence." For those who don't speak science, that's what makes animals glow. We want our children to practice seeing God in their everyday lives, but I'm going to guess that if I asked the adults in this room to do the same thing and to turn to your neighbor and name them, that we might have a revolt. Why is it that we are so quick to put kids on the spot for doing this and we adults quiver at the idea? When was the last time that you shared with someone a way that you felt God working in your life? The more we practice, the better we get at identifying God's work in our lives, of seeing the yeast/mustard seed of God's kingdom start to sprout and come alive.

That's not to say that it's always easy. Sometimes, we need someone to help us to see God's grace, to point it out to us, especially as we go through trying times. In Paul's letter to the Romans that Janet read earlier in the service today, he reminded them that bad things would still happen, there would be hardship and famine and peril and sword, but in all things, we are more than conquerors, for God is with us through it all- Paul writes, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing- not divorce or hardship or cancer or loss of a job or bullying or miscarriage or discrimination—none of it will be able to separate us from God's love.

But, when we are in the middle of those trials and tribulations, it's hard to see God's grace, and sometimes it's hard to feel God's presence. This is where the practice comes in—when we are used to looking for God's presence, it's so much easier to spot it.

But even then, sometimes, we can't lift our eyes enough to see. And, this is when we need someone whose mustard seed faith has grown into a tree to offer us shelter and respite—We need others who have been there to help point out the hidden gifts of God's grace in the midst of our suffering.

If life is great for you right now, I'm so happy for you- keep your eyes open for God in your midst, and for those who need help finding God in theirs. But, if you are walking through one of the times when God's grace feels deeply buried and hard to see, trust that new life is coming, resurrection is coming, hope is sprouting — I know how hard it is to see in those moments— but God is with you even now. God is in the warm blanket that is offered as you go through chemotherapy. God is in the hand that reaches out to hold yours to let you know that you aren't alone. God is in the sunbeam that streaks through the window. God is in the very beat of your own heart and the rise and fall of your breath. And, one of the greatest ways that God is present is through each of us.

I try to remember that each of us can be the answer to someone else's prayer. God has placed treasures in our lives that when buried and cared for will sprout up in us to provide respite and care for others, like the

mustard tree that provides shelter and care for the birds. Or, perhaps like yeast, we help to enrich the lives of others, to bring it to life so that they might grow and nourish and be nourished.

God's grace, God's mercy, God's love—the lives that God wants for us— all of this is hidden in the potential of faith. All of this is God's treasure waiting for us to uncover, to allow God to grow inside of us.

Jesus doesn't stop His teaching with the yeast and the seed, He goes on to say that the Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure, worth giving all that we have for. In one story, a person sells all that they have in order to buy the land where they know that the treasure lay. In another, the merchant gives up everything to buy a single pearl. In both parables, each person is willing to give up all that they have in order to have the treasure that they seek.

Amy-Jill Levine, a professor at Vanderbilt Divinity school, points out that these parables probably aren't about sacrificing, giving everything up for God—it's too obvious, but instead she believes that Jesus is challenging us to consider whether or not we are seeking after the right treasure. Are we looking for God's grace or are we settling for a counterfeit— a treasure that is not worthy of children of God? Are we willing to give up everything for a counterfeit or have we found the real deal?

AJ (as she likes to be called) shared that she teaches the gospel of Matthew at the Riverbend Maximum Security prison. On Monday evenings, she teaches 12 Riverbend incarcerated citizens and 12 Vanderbilt Divinity students. When discussing Matthew 13:45-46, she points out that Jesus may be challenging us to think about the things that are important to us. She asks them, "What is your pearl of supreme value? For what would you sell everything that you own?"

For one student, she gave up her family, her church, her status as a minister's wife to answer her call into ministry, for she came from a tradition where women couldn't be ministers. Another divinity student was an alcoholic. At one time, she had given up home, food, and family for alcohol. For some of the Riverbend students, the answers were also surprising. One wanted freedom—something he realized only after he didn't have it. Another wanted safety, another, his dignity.

AJ writes, "When I drove home that evening, with the search-lights and the barbed wired reflecting in my rear-view mirror, I realized that this student's 'pearl' is something that I take for granted" (Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, p. 163).

Again, sometimes it takes someone else to point out the God-Sightings in our lives, the places where God is working and moving and blessing us, the treasures that He offers to us. I think of those Riverbend students as helping to train our binoculars on what is important, what is a true treasure.

What are you searching for today? What do you hope to find in the kingdom? Freedom, safety, dignity, escape from pain, joy? Perhaps you already have what another yearns for. Hearing it makes us value that gift from God even more, doesn't it? Hearing it challenges us to discern whether the pearl that we are seeking is the real deal— or is it a counterfeit, something that that promises much, but delivers little? If our eyes are focused on the wrong packages, on the counterfeits, we will have a much harder time finding the gifts that God has to offer us— the gifts of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. These are the gifts that come from the presence of God in our lives—from the tiny gifts of grace— the mustard seeds and the yeast of faith that begin small and grow beyond our imaginations. These gifts are given to us so that we can help others to find the true pearls of great price— that which is truly of value: God's unending love and mercy, and God's abiding presence.

So, is the kingdom of heaven like a mustard seed or a pearl? Yeast or a treasure? Is it seen in a deer or in a boy appreciating lightening bugs? Is the Kingdom in the embrace of a friend or the eyes of a guest at First Community Kitchen? Is God breaking through in the sunset, or the sunflower, or through you and me? Jesus' answer is yes- and.... Keep your eyes peeled; there's so much more to discover. Share your stories, for sometimes God's presence is hard to discern. Keep your hearts open, for God is just waiting to burst through, and there's so much more to discover! Amen.

Here these words of our closing hymn/a hymn as our prayer:

Open my eyes that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.
Open my mouth and let me bear
gladly the warm truth ev'rywhere.
Open my heart and let me prepare
love with thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, my mouth, illumine me,
Spirit divine!