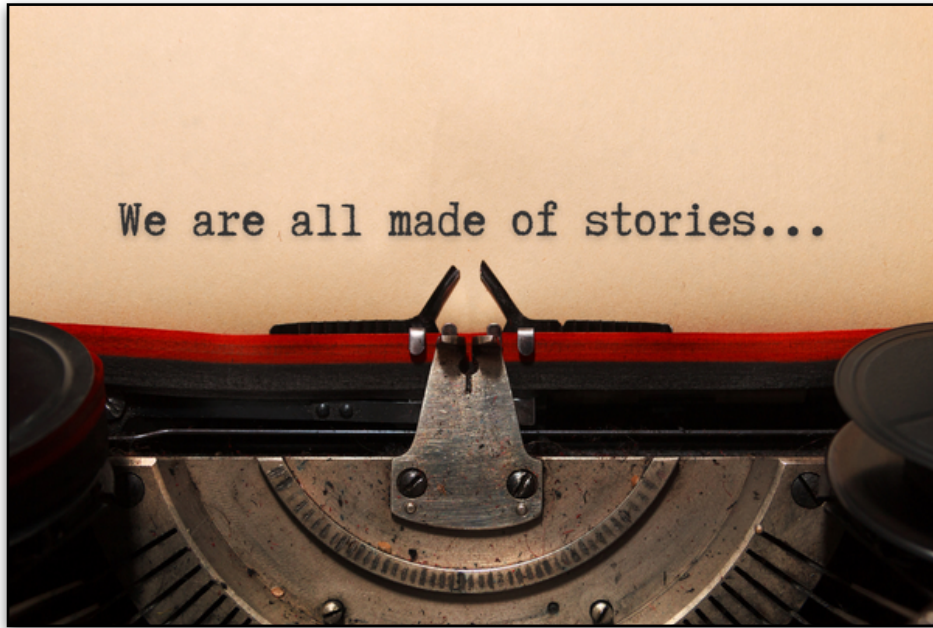


Sermon on Sunday 26 July 2026

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Romans 8. 31-38 & Matthew 13. 31-35, 44-46



We are all made of stories

One of things I really miss is reading my now grown-up kids a bedtime story. It was always such a special moment as their little warmth snuggled in beside you, their breathing changed, and you got to create funny voices for the characters and travel together into fantastical worlds.

Stories help us make sense of the world; they actually create empathy by crossing borders; they take us into the worlds of others and help shape the world we're in. We are *all* made of stories.

And Jesus knew this. That's why he only ever taught with stories or parables. Never ever did he lay out a systematic theology,

thank God! He wanted *us* to do the work; to interpret these wisdom stories for ourselves. He understood that faith is born first in the imagination, in the re-imagining of life. Here we can encounter ourselves and God and our own very personal truth and wisdom.

And Jesus' parables always started where people were, in the everyday domestic or agricultural life of the folk he hung out with. Wouldn't it be interesting to hear what stories he would tell in today's world?

So, I want to explore these four one-liner parables. Each one a fresh insight, a further clue to what Jesus called The Kingdom or Household of God; this new era of God's reign, this new community of God's love.

First up; the parable of the mustard seed.

Now this kind of mustard isn't the little yellow seeds we've all planted on damp kitchen roll as children. This mustard can grow up to ten feet tall! And traditionally this parable has been interpreted as a story about a Kingdom growing wildly from the smallest beginnings.

But the first-century listeners would have heard something else. They'd wonder why on earth a man would intentionally plant mustard, an invasive weed which spreads uncontrollably. Add to that the religious laws of the time which forbade planting two different kinds of seed in one field, and, 'Houston, we have a problem!'. Shouldn't Jesus have used a more appropriate

horticultural reference, like a mighty and majestic oak or Cedar of Lebanon, for instance?

But no, Jesus intentionally chooses a shrubby trespassing weed to confound those expectations. This kingdom is not an empire. It will grow quietly and scandalously in the everyday soil of ordinary life. It will be a subversive nuisance which refuses to be contained by religion or empire. And, as if that's not enough, he adds, 'The birds will come and perch on those branches.' In ancient prophecy, birds nesting in trees were often symbolic of foreigners, Gentiles, outcasts finding refuge. So, Jesus is saying, this weed of a kingdom will overturn social and religious rules. It's for everyone, especially those who traditional religion ignores or excludes.

Then, there's the parable of the yeast. Again, it's a crazy story because 60 pounds is a massive batch of flour; enough to make well over a hundred pizzas! So, there's something here about superabundance and exponential growth. But this is also controversial. You see, at that time yeast actually had negative connotations. It symbolised moral corruption and the spreading influence of sin. So, once again Jesus flips the narrative. Yeast now becomes a symbol of transformation. And, we're told the woman *hides* the yeast in the flour. So, this kingdom will grow unseen in hidden places, particularly among those deemed 'sinful'.

These parables remind us that the Kingdom of God grows in the neglected and unexpected. It's happening in the ordinary everywhere, hardly ever in the spectacular or the successful or the super-spiritual. These parables invite us to notice where the Kingdom grows; in small acts of faith and hope and love and defiance, in and through ordinary people like you and me; in

moments when something shifts or is reimagined, and things are never the same again.

I wonder if you can think of any small acts of faith, hope, love or defiance which changed you, and therefore changed the world. What Kingdom moments and stories have you consciously or unconsciously been witness to or part of? Mostly we only recognise them in the looking back.

And then, there's these parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl beyond price. Traditionally the treasure and the pearl are interpreted as the Kingdom itself, worth searching for and giving everything up for. But what if the 'man' or the 'merchant' in these stories isn't actually us, but God? And if that's the case, that would make us... the treasure... the pearl beyond price. In this Kingdom, God searches for us because we are his treasure.

Most of us, if we're honest, don't believe that. Life, upbringing, sometimes religion itself has done its best to convince us otherwise. And yet, didn't Jesus give up everything for us? Doesn't he never give up on us?

And, as Romans reminds us, if God is for us, well, who can be against us? And what can ever come between us?

We are *all* made of stories. If we can trust these stories of Jesus, then just imagine what could happen? Whole worlds could change.