

# Lakewood Congregational Church

*A Congregation of the United Church of Christ*

Sunday, July 26, 2020

An Order of Worship to be followed in your home, along with our  
worship video on your own  
Preferably at 10:00am



## Welcome and Announcements

Welcome to worship on this Sunday.

*\*\*\*We are sending out a letter and a survey this week to the congregation and really, anyone who is connected to our church. It will be sent by mail and made available electronically. The purpose of it is for our staff and lay leadership to discern how we can most effectively support this Body of Christ in our spiritual journey for the foreseeable future. Since early on, LCC has been watching for a two-week decline in cases in our county before resuming in-person worship, but we are mindful that even after that benchmark is met, many of the beloved ones we are in covenant with will not be able to safely attend worship in our sanctuary until there's a vaccine or numbers are very low, so it will be essential for us to continue providing a quality online service option, and continued creative connection with our community. As much as we long to return, God is calling us to seize the hope and energize ourselves to walk this leg of our Spiritual Journey together. And so I do want you to look for that letter and survey, and also, as always, reach out to us if you're in need of spiritual support. We want you to be assured that you are not alone, and that you are beloved to us and to God.\*\*\**

We are glad you're worshipping with us today. Please know that no matter who you are and where you are in life's journey you are welcome and embraced among us to worship a loving God who welcomes us all.

When you begin your in-home worship service, pause to center yourself and then hold your palms towards the computer screen

or to your heart and imagine the energy of connection. Think of many of the people you love at Lakewood Congregational Church and the Body of Christ throughout the world, and feel the ways in which our hearts are connected to yours.

Say, “May the Peace of Christ be with you”

### **Offering and Contribution Collection**

Please consider fulfilling your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community. You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd., Lakewood, OH 44107
  - Texting STEWARD to 44-321
  - Sending a gift through your bank’s online bill pay
  - By using the donate button on the church’s website [www.lcc-church.org](http://www.lcc-church.org)
  - Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options
- Let us Worship God.

### **Prelude**

*At the River*, arr. Aaron Copland  
Naomi Columna, soprano; Ben Malkevitch, piano

### **Call to Worship**

Join me in our spoken call to worship, which is based on today’s Gospel passage.

Leader: The kingdom of heaven is like:  
**People: A tiny mustard seed that carries the life of a tree**  
Leader: The kingdom of heaven is like:  
**People: A tiny portion of yeast that makes bread rise**  
Leader: The kingdom of heaven is like:  
**People: A tiny pearl of great price that we would give all our “stuff” to have**  
Leader: The kingdom of heaven is like:  
**People: A fishing boat filled with catch—good and bad together—with fishers wise to recognize the good.**

### **Invocation**

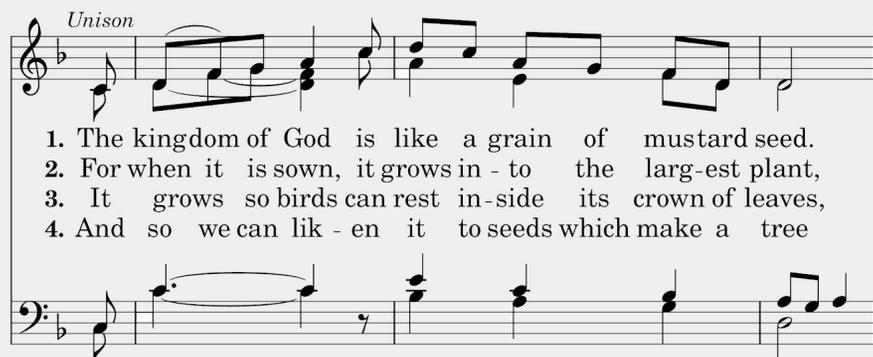
Holy One, you call us to find your kingdom already hidden in our world— in tiny, transforming possibilities; in beauty that calls us to surrender all; in complicated choices that call for wisdom. Reveal yourself here in this moment And heighten our senses that we may find you and join you in building this kingdom of love, and hope, and peace. In the name of the One who calls us to seek, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

## Hymn

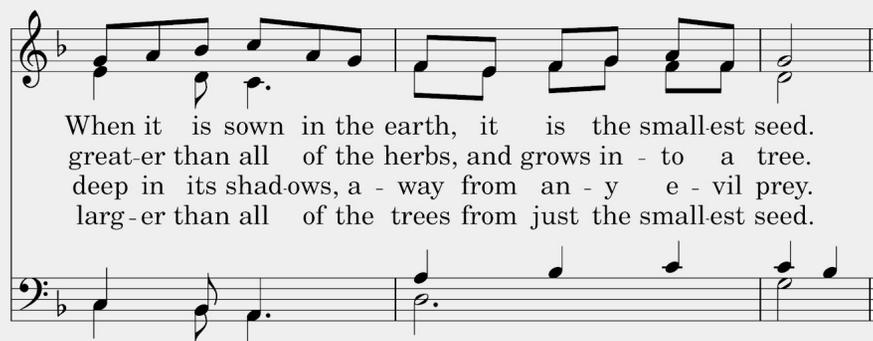
### *The Kingdom of God*

Naomi Columna, soprano; Ben Malkevitch, piano

*Unison*



1. The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed.  
2. For when it is sown, it grows in - to the larg-est plant,  
3. It grows so birds can rest in-side its crown of leaves,  
4. And so we can lik - en it to seeds which make a tree



When it is sown in the earth, it is the small-est seed.  
great-er than all of the herbs, and grows in - to a tree.  
deep in its shad-ows, a - way from an - y e - vil prey.  
larg-er than all of the trees from just the small-est seed.

*Refrain*



It is like the kingdom of God and a mys - ter - y.

## Pastoral Prayer

\*\*\*Sorry, there is no transcript of this week's Pastoral Prayer.\*\*\*

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

## Invitation to the Offering

Our God calls us to seek and find the hints of the Kin-dom in our world, and to nurture its growth among us. We will use our gifts, tithes and offerings to rebuild the body of Christ.

## Dedication Prayer

Grow these gifts in your love, bless our offerings, our hearts and our hopes in your love to make us worthy of your work for your kingdom in heaven, and among us here, even now. Fill these gifts and each of us with your goodness. Amen.

## Scripture Reading, read by Ruby Fraunfelder

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes."

And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

## **Message**

\*\*\*We've included this transcript, word-for-word, for the benefit of people who do not have audio access on their computer. Please keep in mind that it is written in a way it's spoken, so

the grammar/sentence structure may feel a bit awkward to read. Even so, this feels like the best way to communicate to as many people as possible.

This is our third week of parables in the Gospel of Matthew, but our parables today are these rapid-fire metaphors-- one right after the other, with no time for explanation, no questions and answers. The parables we've heard so far are much longer parables, with more time to digest and let them sink in, and time for some explanation to follow. But today-- five in a row with no break in between and in the end he asks this question: "Have you understood all of this? ... Do you get what I'm saying?" And they respond, simply: "yes."

So it's important to understand that these parables, in that place and time, sounded pretty absurd. The mustard seed was a weed-- invasive and fast-growing and enormous, that would take over the land and steal the resources from other, more nutrient-rich crops. Yeast, as repeated frequently in the Old Testament, was considered unholy. Jews were to eat unleavened bread... and here, this woman snuck yeast into something like 60 pounds of flour-- yeast, never again separable from the flour, would produce months and months of fluffy, leavened bread. The next two comparisons are stories of men giving up everything they own because they have found something else of great value. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Rich or poor, skillful or just plain lucky, each man finds something that makes everything else he owns trivial by comparison and he does not think twice about trading it all in." And the final comparison, about the net thrown into the sea, describes that

the Kingdom of God is not something that we seek and find, but instead something that finds and catches us and draws us in.

Let me try to offer a few parables that I think might be comparable today:

The Kingdom of God is like the guy who gently dropped three Zebra mussels into Lake Erie one day while he was fishing, and over the next three decades watched as they multiplied and permanently changed the ecosystem of the lake.

The Kingdom of God is like the gas station worker who accidentally stumbled upon a winning lottery ticket while restocking the ticket rolls at the checkout counter, so stuffed the ticket in his pocket and quit work with no notice, leaving the gas station unattended until the manager showed up, surprised and confused, with a line out the door.

The Kingdom of God is like the woman who saw that the sailboat of her dreams was for sale. So she sold everything she owned to buy it.

I want you to see how these parables that Jesus told are so over the top... so much more than just simple life shifts. Jesus is trying to get the point across that the Kingdom of God cannot be obtained with any kind of half-measure, or logic or reason. You see the way of Jesus, this commitment to Kingdom-building, changes everything... it catches us off guard and there is no turning back. There's never just one Zebra Mussel. You can't take that yeast back out of the flour. You can't go back to a job that you left with no notice. You can't trade the sailboat back in

and get your house and your car back. Professor and Theologian David Lose writes of these parables: "The Gospel makes a claim on your whole life, not just part. It invades your whole world and reality and can't be contained only to your spiritual, Sunday self. Not only that, but it taints the reality we've grown to accept, challenges the views we've lived by, and again and again calls into question assumptions that have guided much of our lives in the world."

These parables are about drastically life-altering moments... things that change everything we ever knew... and if this is the Kingdom of God that Jesus is proclaiming and living, then what do we do if we don't want life-altering; we want to stay the same... we're actually pretty content with what we've got here (or maybe what we had pre-pandemic)? It makes you wonder, is the Gospel only "Good News" to those who struggle with what the earthly world has offered them, while it sounds like "Bad News" to those who feel comfortable and safe with life as it is? If you already believe that you have everything you could ever want, then it's hard to imagine something so precious that you'd give up everything you have for it.

I'm really thinking about how drastically life-altering the pandemic has been, and what if a parable is to come of it. The Kingdom of God is like a pandemic that turned the whole world upside down, devastated individuals, businesses, and communities alike, but in the end we discovered that we belong to each other and that we're willing to sacrifice life as we knew it in order to protect the lives of the vulnerable. The pandemic turned the world upside down, but in the end we wove a new garment that more adequately fit all of creation.

Christianity is a communal faith. It is not about “me and what I have.” It is about “us and that we care for each other”-- this is the basis of Liberation Theology, which says that until all are free, none are free. If we believe that we have everything we could ever need then it is only because we have failed to open our eyes to the needs of the rest of God’s people. If we are fully content with the promises of the earthly world, then it is because we have built a life for ourselves that revolves around our own privilege, power, worldly promises, and self-interest.

Because you see, even if we have all that we need, there are still hungry children in our own town. There is still abuse and neglect in family homes. We cannot ignore the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on black communities, and an achievement gap in our public school systems that parallels race and socioeconomic status. There is still an opioid epidemic and chronic homelessness. Suicide is still the second-leading cause of death for young people ages 10-24, and four times higher for our youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender. As long as there are children without a place to belong and human beings who do not know they are made in the image of God and deeply beloved, then we must commit to a disruptive Gospel like the one we find in these parables. It is the only faithful way to walk in the way of Christ, because for the love of God we cannot accept the world as it is.

All of this is so uncomfortable. Even the parables themselves are uncomfortable-- the profanity of yeast, the obnoxiousness of mustard trees, the deceitfulness of the guy who buried the treasure and bought the land... and those of you who love our

Great Lakes are still stuck way back on the zebra mussels and are offended by even the notion that they could represent the Kingdom of God. But you see Jesus Christ, in all his Glory, is an uncomfortable Teacher, Savior, and Prophet. Born in a barn, he was threatening the powerful even as a tiny, nonverbal baby. He shared meals with prostitutes and sinners, touched the hands of lepers and the hem of the garment of a broken woman. He reached across borders and boundaries to express the love of a grace-filled, ever-embracing, fully-committed, liberating God to those who the world would not pause to look at. This Gospel of Shalom for all people-- even if it is disrupting and even upsetting to many of us-- is something worth buying at any cost.

The truth is, if we are uncomfortable-- if I’m uncomfortable preaching it or you are uncomfortable hearing it, then it is only because we have not been walking closely enough in the footsteps of Jesus who did not care for a second about his own comfort as long as there were people in need.

Friends, we have a choice in front of us today. We can long to return to life as it was in February, or we can orient ourselves into a hope that this pandemic will become a parable: that this world-shattering moment in global history will transform us into a global promise that we belong to each other, into a community that liberates and creates wholeness for all of God’s people.

I’m concerned when I see the obsession with returning to life as it was. Let me tell you that I loved life as it was too-- I loved life in February. I loved what my kids had, what my family had, what our church had, and there are many moments when I long

to return to all of that as quickly as possible. But if we can seize this moment to pursue justice and equity for all of creation, if we can seize this moment to build relationships in our own church community in creative ways, then, beloved, this is the day that the Lord has made, and I will trade all of what we had before for a world in which every child is as loved as my own.

These parables tell us that we should care a whole lot less about returning to the comfortable, and a whole lot more about turning the world upside down in pursuit of justice and liberation and wholeness for all. It is in these challenging, uncomfortable moments when we pursue the hope of the future rather than longing to return, that we truly occupy the overlap between heaven and earth... when we truly realize the Kingdom of God.

Beloved, the Kingdom of God is for us. It is for you and it is for me, just as much as it is for the lost, the last, the least, the marginalized and the oppressed. The Kingdom of God is everything and more than we have ever been able to imagine, and it is not just offered to us-- it is promised to us-- it pursues us. But it cannot be for some of us unless it is for all of us.

In the meantime, as we pursue this vision far beyond what we can imagine, we must find ways to catch glimpses of hope. We catch the glimpses in the connections we are making here and now-- as we support each other in overcoming addiction and managing depression, as we watch our children adapt their friendships, as we create and admire art and music and technological innovations, as we wear our masks to protect the vulnerable, as we find ways to socialize in physically distant

ways, as we experience the resurrection in one another's stories. I see the Kingdom of God in each of you-- so many of you who selflessly give your time and energy to feeding, to visiting, to clothing, to welcoming in new ways that fit the day we have. I see the Kingdom of God in you as you give of your resources so selflessly to this mission and vision. That hope, you see, is the balm that heals our souls as we grieve for what we have left behind, and the energy we need to forge a new way ahead.

The end of today's scripture makes me laugh a bit. When I go back to that question Jesus asks at the end of his rapid-fire parables: "Do you understand all of this?" and they answer, "yes." You know, I don't think they really do. I don't think any of us really can understand the way of living to which Jesus is calling us. But we sure can try, and thanks be to God we have the example of Jesus Christ and the call of the Holy Spirit to keep calling us back onto the path, even when it's uncomfortable.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Benediction**

Go forth in Wisdom, in hope, in courage, With hearts open to recognize the signs of the reign of God in our midst, and courage to create more space for grace in our lives and our world.

### **Postlude**

Fanfare from *Te Deum* by Charpentier

Stephen Stavnick, trumpet; James Allenbrook, organ