

# So many parables (Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52)

## Five is too many to preach about.

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Parables are like tiny houses: While a lot of life and possibility are packed inside what seems like an attractively small and simple space, walking inside can feel less like a cozy hiding place and more like a realization that all the dreams you had about a poetic, minimalist, spiritual life are in fact more complicated, costly, and uncomfortable than daydreaming would lead you to believe. Five parables is too many to preach about on one Sunday in most churches; if you're preaching on this Matthew text, consider choosing one or two. Or, for what could be a nontraditional but poetic sermon, offer a vignette or just a few thoughts for each, one after the other.

Frankly, I encourage you *not* to preach on the mustard seed, if you can avoid it, because it gets the most attention in popular and Sunday School culture, and I'm not sure it needs much more.

Here are some ideas about three of the five parables to get you started on the direction the Spirit may be chasing you to go this Sunday:

**The leaven.** Today, we buy yeast in tiny, hermetically sealed packets at a grocery store. It's clean and dry, like a fine sand. But in Jesus' time, people made their own leaven from a bit of old bread, left out to ferment. It wasn't clean or tidy like our yeast—it was sticky, wet, smelly, and funky, like sourdough, beer, or aged cheese.

This funky stuff is what the woman takes and mixes with a huge amount of fresh flour—three measures is enough to make bread for 100 people. Perhaps Jesus wants us to imagine she is baking for a whole village or a wedding feast? It's a smelly, funky gunk that makes this gigantic batch of new bread rise and expand to feed a crowd at God's party.

The kingdom of God, too, grows and mushrooms from what may seem like the stinky gunk of our own lives. But things are stinky because they are alive and growing. If that's how the kingdom of heaven is, how might we look differently at everyday life, with its pain, disappointments, and frustrations? What if these things are a funky gunk, like sourdough starter or compost: not something to be eliminated, avoided, or neutralized but food to help new life grow in us?

**The field.** As a midwesterner, I imagine the parable of the field taking place in the exurbs. I picture someone walking around an industrial corn or soybean field that is for sale, marketed to big developers of housing tracts or intermodal warehouses. The person finds something precious there, something they can't carry off over cover of night. Maybe it's a crumbling but marvelous specimen of a farmhouse that they want to renovate and make into their family home. Or a nearly extinct prairie flower growing in the roadside and irrigation ditches. Or, for a less lyric interpretation, maybe it's lucrative reserves of oil, gas, or rare earth metals beneath the field.

To buy this otherwise unassuming piece of land before a group of developers can, this person sells their house, cars, furniture, jewelry, stocks—everything they have—to possess and safeguard this treasure.

**The good and bad fish.** The last parable is not much like the others. It may stick in your throat: the good fish are saved, and the bad fish are thrown out. Like last Sunday, we again have angels throwing evildoers into a fiery furnace with “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Perhaps this parable throws us back on our own responsibility: What is our response to Jesus’ parables? What kind of life will we choose? What will we seek? Only the angels can tell the difference enough to sort us, once we’re all caught in God’s net. We can’t look around right now and pick out who’s doing the work of the kingdom and who isn’t, much as we may be tempted to.

On the other hand, it’s hard not to notice that the good fish are going to get eaten, while the bad fish are thrown back to life in the sea. It is always good to remind people that parables don’t necessarily hold up as pure allegory. Regardless, we might turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans for the final word: “Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God; 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.”