

“The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like ...”

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

July 26, 2026 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Matthew 13:31-33

As many of you know, this is my first Sunday back after a two week vacation and let me begin by saying, “I missed you!” I am very glad to be back. We had a wonderful journey, but it always so good to come home, isn’t it. Our trip this year was a different kind of vacation than we have taken in a while as we used this opportunity to reconnect with family we don’t get to see very often. For both Peter and I, we left home for college and never really went back for very long to live with our parents which, especially in my case, meant I also didn’t get to see my brothers too often. Lots of reasons for this but suffice to say that because of these long separations from family, this was a deeply meaningful trip for all of us in a lot of ways. We reconnected with Peter’s brother Kevin as well as with my two brothers Jack and Bill, both of whom still live in our hometown of Pittsburgh, PA. On the way to Pittsburgh, we also stopped in Carlisle, PA for a few days, which is where my parents lived as my dad’s life came to an end. My mom then built her own independent life over the next 20 years before her failing health brought her to Rhode Island to live with me. My parents are buried in Carlisle which is the main reason I wanted to visit there.

So, our two week trip to Pennsylvania, Maryland and Ohio covered a lot of geography and as well as several lifetimes. It would not be an exaggeration to say that both Peter and I have been mostly estranged from our siblings since the death of our parents. We are both much younger than our older siblings – roughly 10 years difference in our ages – so in very many ways, we

have always been doing our own thing within our families. When we were in nursery and elementary school, our siblings were in middle and high school. When we were in middle school, they were in college. When we were in high school, they were out on their own building their own lives and families. There was just not a lot of crossover in our lives. Why would there be? We lived in DC for ten years after we graduated from college and then in Rhode Island after that. That whole time, my brothers and their families remained in Pittsburgh. Peter's brother remained in Maryland and his sister lived in San Francisco until she died. So, we have literally lived in different phases of life and different geographic locations for all of our lives. This meant we literally didn't know each other. At all. Same parents. Different experiences even as children. A gigantic chasm of a gap between us and them and, recently, as my interests in genealogy have been piqued, I decided I was very tired of that gap. I also realized that if the chasm was to be bridged, I would need to be the one to start the construction.

The kingdom of heaven is like a fractured and broken family making the effort to heal the breaches and the hurts resulting.

We enjoyed many wonderful experiences during our two week road-trip. Amazing food for one. The Walnut Bottom Diner in Carlisle, PA became our second home during that part of our visit. It was an old fashioned diner specializing in the Pennsylvania food I grew up with. Stuffed cabbage! Gravy fries! Apple butter with cottage cheese as a side! (Didn't order any but was so excited to see it on the menu!) Fresh apple pie! And Jack was able to try scrapple which he quickly discovered he didn't like. In Pittsburgh we sampled pierogies, and a famous Primanti Brothers sandwich. Check out my Facebook page to see the

photos. Then, in Ohio, more pierogies and pulled pork sandwiches. Yikes. But the best meals of all were those we shared with these family members we had come to visit – each of them amazing and delicious in their own right, prepared with loads of love and genuine excitement we were with them to share a meal. These meals were truly a dream come true for me, and now a cherished memory for ever.

The kingdom of heaven is like a family reclaimed, recovered and renewed by love and a willingness to begin again, around a sacred table of fellowship filled with food prepared with love.

One of our most memorable stops on our trip took place as we were driving from Carlisle to Pittsburgh. We had decided to make the time to visit the Flight 93 Memorial in Shanksville, PA. This memorial is dedicated to the crew and passengers of United Airlines Flight 93 who through sheer courage and determination stopped one of the planes piloted by terrorists on September 11, 2001. The plane, in route from Newark, NJ to San Francisco, was commandeered by terrorists after its take-off which had been delayed by 25 minutes. This delay meant that the other three planes hijacked that day, were already hitting their targets as this flight was in the air. The terrorists struck Flight 93 at 9:28am and began turning the plane toward Washington, DC. It is believed their intended target was the US Capitol. The 33 passengers along with the remaining crew not already neutralized by the four terrorists, quickly realized it was up to them to stop whatever was happening. They said goodbye to their families on their cell phones, quickly worked out a plan of attack and advanced on the flight deck door. The last moments of the black box recorder recovered from the plane reveal that after overpowering the terrorist left to guard them, they were pounding on the flight deck door, screaming loudly. The terrorists realized what was

happening and thoroughly rattled, flew the by now upside down plane, into the ground at 563 miles per hour. The plane crashed and disintegrated, so much so that the remains of the people on board could not be recovered. Instead, the entire area of the crash quickly became a makeshift memorial to the lives lost, and to the courage and patriotism they revealed in their unselfish actions. They stopped that plane a mere 18 minutes before it would have reached its target. Our experience at that memorial was one of the most powerful I have ever had at a national memorial park. It is indeed holy ground as it should be. If you ever have the chance to visit it, I urge you to go. I promise you will not leave unmoved.

The kingdom of heaven is like a group of strangers coming together to find the courage and strength to stand up to evil, sacrificing their lives to save strangers.

“The kingdom of heaven is like ...” This phrase appears in Matthew’s Gospel which we heard read a few minutes ago. It also appears in similar texts found in Mark and Luke. It is a phrase attributed to Jesus by which he introduces what is called a “kingdom parable.” A kingdom parable is a short, pithy metaphor which Jesus uses to try to get the people he is teaching to comprehend what God’s kingdom, God’s vision of shalom for everyone, is all about. He is trying to explain how this kingdom vision grows beyond all expectation to achieve the impossible. These kingdom parables are different from the longer parables we also hear from Jesus which use a metaphor contained within a longer story to illustrate his point. Examples of these parables would include the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Parable of the Good Samaritan and so on. What differentiates these short kingdom parables from the longer stories is that they are making use of one simple analogy the people Jesus is speaking to would instantly connect with.

For example, the parable of the mustard seed uses a mustard seed as an example of how one tiny seed has the capacity to grow into a bush large enough for other creatures to make a home within its branches. Okay, fine. Small seed. Big bush. Seems simple enough. Except there's more nuance to the story than that as explained in an article I read while preparing this sermon. In it, a scholar explains that mustard seed bushes in ancient Palestine would have been about as welcome in a field then as kudzu in the South or bittersweet here in New England would be today. Mustard bushes were considered invasive, harmful plants which could quickly overcome land devoted to farming and pasturing sheep and goats, something Jesus' original audience hearing this parable would have known all too well. So, how do we feel about this invasive aspect of considering the mustard seed as a metaphor for the growth of faith? Is it a commentary on how contagious our faith should be once we have claimed it? Should we be actively engaged in spreading it amongst others? It would seem, from the kudzu analogy that this is exactly what we should be doing. In other words, we are not to hold on to this mustard seed of faith for ourselves alone. It is meant to be actively shared with others, getting it to spread like a weed to the people we love so they can then do the same. Now there's a thought...

This next kingdom parable – the leavening added to the flour by the woman – is also interesting. On the surface it too seems pretty straightforward, especially to those among us familiar with baking bread. The leaven needs to be evenly spread throughout the flour mixture. But, as anyone knows who cooks or bakes, you can not mix anything up well (including leavening into flour) without making a mess to some degree. And especially with making bread, you have to get in there with your hands in order to get the leavening evenly distributed. You have to put the work in,

the effort in, to achieve the desired result of adding leaven to flour to make bread. Hmm... Again, Jesus' analogy here takes on new meaning for us. If we understand our faith in God through Jesus to be the leaven, and the rest of the people to be the flour, then it becomes clear that we have to put the effort in to get that leavening into the mix. We can't just dump it on top of the flour, like talking about our faith or even reading the bible with others and then walking away. We need to go the extra mile, do the extra work, of bringing our faith to life in deed and word. Put another way, we can't just talk about our relationship with God, with Jesus and assume that's enough for folks to want to share that faith with us. We have to show them by the way we live our lives every day the difference it makes in our lives that we have this life-changing, living relationship with Jesus.

The kingdom of heaven is like Well, lots of things, depending on who we are and what we want to share with others. How would you complete that sentence for yourself? How would you imagine someone reacting to what you have to say about your faith, your commitment to our church, to living as a person who knows Jesus on a personal level? Now that's something to ponder as you are sitting at the beach or hiking your favorite trail or just relaxing on your deck sipping a favorite beverage. *"The kingdom of heaven is like ..."* What say you? I hope you'll let me know what you come up with! I am genuinely curious, and I'm thinking Jesus is too. Amen.