

Grounded: Flora & Fauna

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 5, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 13:31-32](#) and [Luke 12:22-34](#)

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That mustard seed parable is a weird parable. “The kin-dom of heaven is like a mustard seed ...” And chapter 13 of Matthew’s gospel has got three other simple, pithy parables. “The kin-dom of heaven is like a yeast ...” “The kin-dom of heaven is like a treasure ...” “The kin-dom of heaven is like a merchant ...”

If we focus on the object, we miss a big part of these parables: human action. The kin-dom of heaven isn’t just like a mustard seed. It’s like a mustard seed that someone plants in the ground. It’s like yeast that someone “hides” in a whole bunch of flour. It’s like a treasure that someone hid in a field. It’s like a merchant who is out searching for a beautiful pearl. Laurel Dykstra says, “The kingdom is not about static symbols but about people engaged in action.”¹

And don’t stop there! When these people act, change happens. Dykstra points out that “A mustard bush is neither big nor wonderful; it is invasive, fast-growing, and impossible to get rid of (like darnel, another invasive weed). The kingdom of God is like kudzu, like Scotch broom, like morning glories, like dandelions.”² I want to know who planted that damn mustard seed in my field. I’m trying to grow some wheat here.

“The pesky mustard seed parable is paired with the one-verse parable of the yeast. A nice domestic image, a little gender parity, maybe even an instance of Jesus speaking directly to women. Well, it would be if the central images didn’t all convey contamination, corruption, and subversion.”³ The woman *hides* the yeast in the flour. Who is she hiding it from? And why there? The result is that all the flour becomes leavened. I sure hope Passover isn’t right around the corner or that flour is useless. “A modern paraphrase might be: ‘The kingdom of God is like a virus in a dirty needle that a junkie took and injected into a vein so the whole body was infected.’ Yet in the parable, from this woman’s ‘hiding’ the yeast comes incredible abundance – bread to feed more than 100 people”⁴ if Passover is more than a couple days away (which it is almost all year long).

This kin-dom Jesus announces is subversive. This kin-dom Jesus announces is unstoppable. It is invasive. It is a nuisance to some. It is an urgent blessing to others. It is shocking. It is abundant. “It requires action and commitment and [it] inspires extreme behavior.”⁵ No wonder it was so adamantly opposed by the principalities and powers of Jesus day. No wonder there are many today who claim to follow Jesus who resist the kin-dom and all that it stands for.

¹ Laurel A. Dykstra, “A Pearl Like a Fishnet,” Sojourners, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/pearl-fishnet> (accessed 4 October 2025).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

While, without some examination, the mustard seed parable at first confuses me, Jesus telling me “do not worry” at first frustrates me. We’ve got plenty of reason to worry. I mean, have you read the news or listened to a news broadcast lately? So, let’s take a closer look.

This reading comes from a chapter in Luke’s gospel that is all about wealth and discipleship. The things in this passage that Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about are clothing and food. Those seem pretty basic to me. It surprises me he didn’t include something about shelter. If I’ve been going without food or clothing (or shelter) for a while, you better believe it’s going to be the first thing on my mind when I wake up and probably the last thing on my mind when I go to sleep. I’m going to worry about it!

But that’s not who Jesus is talking to. He’s not talking to someone living in a war zone. He’s not talking to someone living in a refugee camp. He’s not talking to someone experiencing homelessness in the United States. He’s talking to people who need to be warned against greed – which he’s been doing in the preceding verses. He’s talking to the people who are obsessed with cooking shows and fast fashion. And that crowd might do well to hear the advice he gives: Don’t worry about what you will eat and what you will wear. Get your priorities in order. Seek first the kingdom of God. Let the other stuff take care of itself.

It’s a darn good thing that I’m not obsessed with cooking shows and fast fashion. Except, of course, Jesus is talking to all of us who want to follow him. He’s telling us that a focus on material things is dangerous because it causes us to lose sight of what really matters. When we seek to be rich as the banks and balance sheets measure it, we fail to seek being rich as God sees it. From God’s point of view, Jesus is saying here, we should be storing up our treasures in heaven. And we do that, for example, by selling what we have and giving alms. If you want to know where your heart is, look at how you’re spending and saving and giving away your money.

You all know that Jane Goodall died on Wednesday. I didn’t realize how deeply I admire Dr. Goodall until I noticed how deeply I was moved by this news. Some of that admiration comes of how deeply Goodall’s life differed from so many who are in power in the United States these days.

At a time when our country “is in the grip of fascists motivated only by greed and narcissism,”⁶ Goodall’s life and work showed “that humanity can imagine a different world and live into it. Humanity can reach across the artificial boundaries of human versus ‘lower animals’ and see the profound connections.”⁷ Jane Goodall stored up her treasures in heaven. And it all happened because she considered the ravens and the lilies, and more importantly, the chimpanzees.

Theologian Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite wrote an essay honoring Dr. Goodall on Thursday, and I want to read you a piece of it.

⁶ Susan Thistlethwaite, “Dr. Jane Goodall and the Capacity for Goodness,” *No Fear Religion*, <https://susanthistlethwaite.substack.com/p/dr-jane-goodall-and-the-capacity> (posted and accessed 2 October 2025).

⁷ *Ibid.*

“When Jane Goodall started her work in 1961, the National Geographic Society gave funding for her research first for \$1,400, and then an additional \$1,200. She paid a price for those small grants as the attention she received initially was riddled with sexism and salaciousness. ‘Comely Miss Spends Her Time Eyeing Apes’ and ‘Eat Your Heart Out, Fay Wray,’ the headlines proclaimed ... Even [National Geographic] Society President Melville Bell Grosvenor would refer to her as ‘the blond British girl studying the apes.’

“She made the sexism work for her, however, reasoning that ‘it was potentially useful; people would be less threatened by, and more likely to help, a woman. I was the *Geographic* cover girl,’ she said wryly.

“When the National Geographic balked at giving her the second grant, her mentor, Louis Leakey, astonished the stuffy old guard leadership by announcing, ‘Goodall had documented the primates making and using tools – blades of grass and twigs lowered into mounds to fish for termites. Previously, only humans were thought to have the capacity to do that.’”⁸

These days, I find it strange that tool-making was the defining attribute that made humans human. After all, we now know that elephants “plug up water holes with balls of chewed bark to keep other animals from drinking them away.”⁹ And Goodall showed that Chimpanzees make and use tools, too.

There are lots of animals that use tools (making use of stuff they find without modifying it): sea otters use rocks to open shells to get food; a group of bottlenose dolphins use sea sponges in their beaks to stir ocean-bottom sand and uncover prey; a species of octopus collects coconut shell halves discarded by humans to use as shelter. And consider the ravens, and their cousins, the crows. Ravens and crows not only use tools, they make tools. They turn twigs, leaves, and even their own feathers into tools for getting at hard-to-reach food.¹⁰

Goodall had problems with the scientific establishment when she first started her research into chimpanzees. In an effort to eliminate bias in the researcher, the scientific establishment had set up rules. The goal was laudable. Make it so the researcher will only find what’s true, not what they hope is true. Make it so the researcher doesn’t make connections that feel like they’re there, even when they’re not really there. So, don’t anthropomorphize. Don’t put human traits on an animal. Don’t develop a relationship with the animals your study. Don’t do things like naming the animals you’re studying; give them numbers. Don’t describe emotions. Don’t describe personalities. Don’t speculate on motives.

Not having had a formal science education, she didn’t know the rules that scientific researchers were supposed to follow. So, she named the chimpanzees she studied. She described the emotions she saw in them. She described how the chimpanzees behaved as communities. She saw and described things that the rules of science were blinding scientists to be able to see. Jane Goodall was able to see that the boundaries we humans had

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Charles Q. Choi, “10 Animals That Use Tools,” *Live Science*, <https://www.livescience.com/9761-10-animals-tools.html> (posted 14 December 2009; accessed 4 October 2025).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

drawn between us and the rest of the animal kingdom “was thinner and fuzzier than we wanted to believe.”¹¹

Jane’s work, from the beginning, “produced a revolution of our understanding of ourselves.”¹² As her biographer Dale Peterson wrote of her, she was “the woman who redefined man.”¹³

Dr. Thistlethwaite suggests that, rather than tool-making being the thing that summarizes what it means to be human, that we might consider empathy.¹⁴ I don’t think that’s accurate. I’ve seen far too many dog and cat videos to think that humans are the only animals that possess empathy. That said, I do agree with Thistlethwaite that “Empathy is the witness to God on earth.”¹⁵

Which brings us back to some of the stuff I worry about, Jesus’ admonition not to worry notwithstanding. There are people in the right-wing today trying to destroy empathy. And I suspect they are trying to do so in order to destroy our connection with one another and the planet. “The late Charlie Kirk did not like empathy ..., commenting that ‘I can’t stand the word empathy, actually. I think empathy is a made-up, new age term that – it does a lot of damage....’ To conservative Christians have published books arguing that empathy can be corrosive.”¹⁶ The list goes on.

To be clear, this goes against the gospel of Jesus Christ. Empathy is a tool and energy we need to store up our treasures in heaven. Empathy is the motivation that allows us to sell our possessions and give alms.

I’m not a big poetry guy. That said, there are a few poems that are deeply meaningful to me. One is by Wendell Berry: “The Peace of Wild Things.”¹⁷

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives might be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars

¹¹ Hank Green, “You are Probably Underestimating Jane Goodall’s Impact,” *vlogbrothers*, https://youtu.be/d_FzzLeA6pk (posted 2 October 2025; accessed 3 October 2025).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Quoted by Thistlethwaite, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Thistlethwaite, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Nathan J. Robinson, “The Right’s Latest Culture War Crusade is Against Empathy,” *Current Affairs*, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/the-rights-latest-culture-war-crusade-is-against-empathy> (posted 20 September 2025; accessed 4 October 2025). The author notes that “Elon Musk doesn’t like empathy, which he calls the ‘fundamental weakness of western civilization,’ which people ‘exploit.’”

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things,” *Scottish Poetry Library*, <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/peace-wild-things-0/> (Copyright (c) 2012 by Wendell Berry; accessed 4 October 2025).

waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Not to escape, not to hide from hard things in the world, but to listen and observe and connect with God, perhaps it would be a good practice to consider the ravens and the lilies, to go into the peace of wild things, and to be grounded by connecting with flora and fauna.

Amen.