



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

## ***“Contagion”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Luke 13: 10-21*

*August 17, 2025*

I grew up in a historical district in the southeast portion of Racine. About 2 blocks off Lake Michigan, a mile or so south of downtown, there was a five block stretch of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian homes along a red brick street that was preserved with such strict oversight that any utility work that required the removal of those bricks had to be done by mapping the bricks, individually labelling each one, and then placing each individual brick back in the exact form and location from which it had been removed. The neighborhood was such that you had to drop your passenger off in the street before pulling up to the curb, because the curbs were still at horse and buggy height and you couldn't open the passenger door once you were parked. In this older home, like many in our neighborhood, we actually had an old stable in the basement with a large bulkhead in the back that they once used to bring animals in and out of the house. That's where our story begins.

I heard a line in a tv show once in which an FBI agent said something along the lines of, 'No measure of technology, experience, or investigative prowess can meet the power of a criminal being stupid.' This story is proof. It was sometime in the late 1980's that someone broke into our basement overnight. It was a small padlock on a wooden bulkhead, so it's not as though it was difficult, and the door to the rest of the house was always kept locked, so they didn't really get away with much except some camping gear. That same night, it turns out, a number of other houses were robbed in the same way. The individual broke into the basement through the bulkhead, took what they could, and then moved on to the next. But, here's the thing... It was just before dawn when this occurred, and it had snowed all night. So, when someone discovered what had happened and called the police, the responding officers were literally able to follow his footprints – once step to the next – from each house to another – and straight on to the place where he was hiding and thus, arrested. I found myself thinking about that story this week because I do wonder how often we pay attention to the impact of our choices and the trail they leave behind.

We are nearing the end of our summer exploration of the Beatitudes through the lens of the parables of Jesus, and today that brings us to Matthew 5:9, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* The word that is translated as 'peacemakers' here in Matthew is one that means very much what it sounds like. The Greek root is one that speaks of peace-loving or pacific – it is a word that speaks to a stance and perspective that leans into that desire to, in the most simplistic of terms, 'get along.' And, frankly, I'm not sure there has been a

time – at least in the recent history of our country – in which such a stance and perspective was so desperately needed in the culture that surrounds us. The thing that struck me about our parables today, however, is that they serve as a fundamental reminder of the fact that we are constantly making these choices – whether we realize it or not.

We pick up our reading from Luke right where Bruce left off. Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath when he healed that woman, only to be challenged by those who felt he shouldn't be doing such things on the day of rest. Jesus' retort seems to quiet that particular group of critics, at least for a moment, and Luke tells us that the crowd was rejoicing at the wonders of what Jesus was doing. That's where we pick it up in verse 18.

*He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."*

*20 And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."*

I'm fascinated by that transition – at least in the manner in which it is portrayed by Luke. Some of you may recall that Karl Schimpf used to say that when you see 'therefore' in the Bible, you need to consider what it's there for – and that's how Luke frames these parables. "He said therefore..." In other words, these parables are a direct response to the events that preceded them. And what are the events that preceded them? It was Jesus at odds with those trying to stick to the letter of the law regarding the sabbath followed by those in the crowd who were rejoicing in what Jesus was doing. That, I think, is the critical point. There are really three voices at play here in this story from Luke. We have Jesus choosing to put the care of another above ritualistic adherence to the letter of the law, we have the opponents of Jesus doing the opposite, and we have the people choosing which of these perspectives is worthy of celebration.

It's in that context that Jesus offers these two parables. He offers first the parable of the mustard seed in which he points to someone placing a tiny seed in the garden that grows into a majestic tree offering shelter to the birds and a home for their nests. Then he offers the parable of the yeast in which, in similar fashion, the smallest amount of that yeast is what causes that bread to leaven and grow and feed the hungry. Small, seemingly inconsequential, starting points that blossom into much greater ends. That's the point that Jesus tries to make in this moment. With him choosing to put the care of the other above ritualistic adherence to the letter of the law, and his opponents doing the opposite, Jesus turns to that third group and says, 'That's what the kingdom of God is like.' The kingdom of God is people choosing to spread the seed of love... of compassion... of humble concern for the others around us. More to the point of today, however, what Jesus is saying to those people in that moment is that the kingdom stems from choosing what yeast they're going to mix and what seed they're going to spread.

You see, what I find most compelling about those parables in that moment is that the comparative of Jesus to his opponents allows us to infer the full meaning of Jesus' words. That said, Jesus doesn't actually say anything about what the yeast is or what the seeds ought to be. Instead, what Jesus makes clear is that it's happening. It's great to analyze the content of the

yeast and the seeds, but we have to start by owning that we're spreading them – that good or bad, intentional or unintentional – it's happening. Much like that stupid criminal walking through the snow leaving unmistakable traces of where he's been and what he's done – we are constantly leaving a trail of impact behind us whether we mean to or not. For good or for bad, we are mixing in the yeast. For good or for bad, we are spreading seeds. And for good or for bad, it's going to grow into something. And that's what brings us back to our Beatitude of the day.

Whether we realize it or not, we are perpetually presented with the opportunity to be a peacemaker, or not – and that choice matters!

You know, it was a couple of years ago that a group of our members were meeting to look at potential paths of growth for our church and we started talking about what our role might be in the community. In a neighborhood in which the people around us aren't generally in need of a hot meal, or backpacks for school, or some of those other tangible offerings that churches can bring to their neighbors, we were searching for needs that we might be able to meet in the people around us. To do so, we went to community leaders to ask them where the gaps were – to inquire as to what keeps them up at night. We heard different things from different people, but the most compelling was from a representative of the Village of Fox Point, who shared that what keeps her up at night is that we just don't get along anymore – that whether it was about Covid mitigation, or politics, or the future of the community pool – the era of civil discourse and respectful disagreement was over. In her eyes, we were losing the community nature that Fox Point had always been. That's not a narrative that's unique to Fox Point and, frankly, it's not getting better.

It almost seems cliché, now, to talk about the divisiveness among us. We are increasingly normalizing a worldview in which there is no room for someone who sees things another way. We gather with the people who think like us, we listen to the programs of the people who vote like us, and step by unintentional step, we increasingly spread the seeds of separation in a time that is crying out for those peacemaking sons and daughters of God who might just drop the seed that, someday, could lead to healing.

Now, we could spend all day exploring the psychological, sociological, and technological, reasons that this is the reality of the moment. There's no doubt that there is much within all of that that needs attention. And the truth is that none of it is going to be fixed overnight and much of it will continue to seem so far beyond our control. But, that's exactly where Jesus' parables come in – because buried within those parables is the reminder that our act of today doesn't need to meet the magnitude of tomorrow. Our act of today is simply that – the tiny seed, the teaspoon of yeast – the small thing that can make a difference far beyond anything we'd imagine at that moment of inception if we'd just choose, today, to spread it.

Our moments of potential peacemaking are, I would argue, far more often than we realize.

- When choose to listen to that person who disagrees with us instead of looking for ways to correct or running away from them altogether – that's a peacemaker's moment.
- When we take the time to double-check that biting claim we see on social media and consider whether or not there's real benefit to sharing it – that's a peacemaker's moment.

- When we smile and acknowledge that person who seems to be ignoring us... When we say hello to that individual on the street instead of turning our gaze the other way... When we choose to be the gracious and pleasant voice even when the other isn't... Those are our peacemaker's moments.

I put words to the page for this message on Thursday. The very next day, I was out running some errands with Becca, our oldest daughter, in preparation for moving her into her new apartment yesterday. We were at Wal-Mart, checking out through the self check-out lane, and you simply couldn't miss the misery in the employee who was overseeing those lanes. She was grunting, and growling, and sharp with her tone with us and everyone else in the lines. She left no question as to how disinterested she was in being helpful to anyone and how unhappy she was to be there. We finished checking out and as we began to walk away with the cart I watched as Becca turned to her with a grand smile and genuine tone as she called out, 'Thank you, have a wonderful day.'

In ways grand and small life is perpetually presenting us with those potential peacemaker moments – and none are going to seem to meet the magnitude of tomorrow. As much as ever, however, our world is crying out for the peacemaking sons and daughters of God, and if we will just meet the moment with the smallest of seeds – there's no telling what that can and will become in time.