



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

St. Luke's, East Hampton

July 26, 2026; Proper 12A [Genesis 29:15-28](#) [Romans 8:26-39](#) [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52](#)

One of the first questions newcomers ask is “How do I become a member of the church?” First of all, you need to know that you don’t need to be a member – and you don’t need to be Episcopalian – to attend worship, receive communion, and participate in the life of this congregation. No matter who you are, where you come from, or where you are in your spiritual journey, you are welcome here. You, of course, are welcome to take the next step and actually join. The traditional way to do this is to request a letter of transfer from a former congregation to St. Luke’s. The most concrete way to become a member is by pledging time, talent and treasure to the congregation and thereby making St. Luke’s mission your own. I am still surprised at the number of people who call St. Luke’s their home yet don’t take this step. You don’t have to live here all year round to be a pledging member here. Many pledge in two different places! You also don’t have to give up your roots or identity to be part of our community. You can become a pledging member of St. Luke’s even if you are Catholic or Baptist or whatever – and are most welcome to receive communion without changing your denominational affiliation. Of course, those who wish to become part of the Episcopal Church are welcome to do so through the service of Confirmation or Reaffirmation, done when the bishop makes his visit here. If you are interested in any of these options, let me know!

The Episcopal Church defines a “communicant in good standing” as someone who is faithful in corporate worship... and has been faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.” Note that this definition doesn’t say anything about being a member of a particular congregation or even the Episcopal Church. It simply describes a person who is faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.”

The emphasis on the Kingdom makes sense. Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God more than anything else. It was the focus of many of his parables. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say "thy kingdom come." Every time Jesus healed a sick person, raised up women, or welcomed foreigners, he was showing people what that kingdom looked like. But what is it? First, it needs to be said that the Kingdom (or Reign) of God is not the church. The church (hopefully) may be a subset of it; but the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven in this morning's gospel) is far more than that. In Jesus' words, "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." "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." These are some of the images and metaphors that Jesus used to describe the kingdom. Take a moment and imagine the images or metaphors you would use to describe the kingdom yourself. Would you say something like "The kingdom of God is like a World Cup match where both sides win," "The Kingdom of God is like a beach where water is warm and the sand never gets too hot," or "The Kingdom of God is a place where all are present but traffic never backs up and you can always find a parking space"? Perhaps you prefer to use actions instead of words. Every time you do the smallest act of kindness, offer a listening ear, or help someone in need, you are planting mustard seeds of hope and faith... and giving other an image of the kingdom. I talked earlier about pledging. The Episcopal Church sets the tithe – 10% of income – as the minimal standard for giving. (This means that if you make \$100,000 a year, your personal kingdom building budget is \$10,000. If you have a household income of \$250,000, your giving goal would be \$25,000, etc. I know it sounds like a lot of money - it is! Imagine what we could do...) Tithing, of course, includes time, talent and treasure. I typically work 50 plus hours a week. A tithe of this time is a little more than five hours a week – which is about what I spend on my ministry with the Coast Guard, with band, and with extra things related to the diocese or to church. Every time you do something to serve the wider community, help someone in

need, speak up for justice, or offer a listening ear or word of healing or hope, you being that bit of leaven in the lump, that pinch of yeast that will create the most heavenly of bread, wine, cheese, or IPA. That kind of giving - that kind of living - is Kingdom work. From the joy of the picnic and the garden party, the celebration of Pride, young kids getting baptized, young adults filling Hoie Hall with beauty in Pianofest, people in need receiving food, people who are sick receiving comfort and prayer, conversations and classes where people dig into scripture and share their questions of faith, St. Luke's has been full of Kingdom moments like that. Turn again to the gospel we just heard. Can you imagine being the man who finds a treasure in a field or a pearl of great price and is so excited that these become the most important things in his life? We had a Legacy Society celebration this week. The people who came - and the people who set up, served, and helped make it so special - feel the same way about St. Luke's. Their giving and living reflect their relationship with God. That's what the Episcopal Church's definition of membership is trying to get at. That's the Kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim and the Kingdom for which we are called to work, pray and give and otherwise grow.

With all that said, the reality is that, like the meaning of a parable, the presence of the Kingdom isn't always that clear. That mustard seed can be pretty tiny and hard to see. In a world caught up in war, wildfires, and wildly conflicting perspectives and opinions, the Kingdom of Heaven can seem very far away. Sometimes like Jacob we can feel stuck on a treadmill and never able to get ahead. When life hits us like that, it can be hard to know what to say or how to pray. In the words of Romans, times like these are "when the Spirit helps us in our weakness and that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Times like these are when we need to hear Paul's message that "all things work together for good for those who love God." Though things may look bad, "If God is for us, who is against us?" As Paul writes, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that 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, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul's message - and the message of Jesus himself - is that despite what it might feel like, the Kingdom of God is coming. Paul's message - and the message of Jesus himself -- is that the Kingdom of God is already here. As members of the church, our job is to work, pray, give - and live - in a way that shows others that this is true.