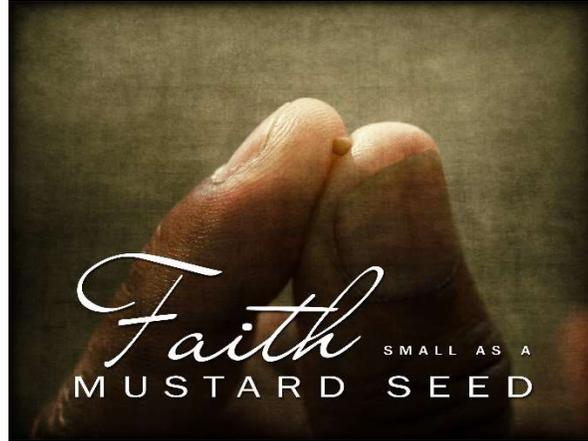


**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
WILLMAR, MN  
JULY 26, 2020**



**Prelude**

**Preparing Our Hearts**

**“All Things Bright and Beautiful” (#20, GG)**

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Refrain:

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small,  
all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.

Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings,  
God made their glowing colors; God made their tiny wings. [Refrain]

The purple-headed mountain, the river running by,  
the sunset, and the morning that brightens up the sky: [Refrain]

the cold wind in the winter, the pleasant summer sun,  
the ripe fruits in the garden, God made them every one. [Refrain]

God gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell  
how great is God Almighty, who has made all things well. [Refrain]

## **Welcome to Worship**

Friends, we are doing worship in a new way during this season. The sanctuary is empty, but we are still the church. The church has always been the people, not the building in which we gather. Even if we cannot be together in this place, we are together in worship today by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and by the digital signal that helps us connect to one another.

Wherever you are, and whether you are watching it live or as a recording, this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

## **Opening Prayer**

If God is for us, who can be against us?  
Let us confess our sins to the One who  
searches us and knows us.

**We confess that we have turned away from you  
and have not lived with upright hearts.  
Forgive us for failing to follow you.  
Guide our feet to walk in your ways  
and serve your world  
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

Your sins are forgiven;  
be at peace, for all things work together for good  
for those who love God.

## **Opening Hymn**

### **“Open the Eyes of My Heart” (#452, GG)**

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Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. Open the eyes of my heart;  
I want to see you; I want to see you;  
Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. Open the eyes of my heart;  
I want to see you; I want to see you;  
to see you high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory.

Pour out your power and love as we sing "Holy, holy, holy."  
Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy.  
Holy, holy, holy, I want to see you.

## **Scripture Lessons**

### **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 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." 33 He told them another parable: "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."

44 "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. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

## **Message**

### **"Of Great Value" Rev. Scott L. Thompson**

I'd like us to take a minute before getting into the sermon and I'd like for us to pull to mind that person, thing, or relationship which we value above all else. I'd like for us to imagine our pearl of great value – if you will, to use the image from the parable. Just take a moment and picture that pearl in your mind for a

moment. OK, now hold that image store it in your mind, we'll be returning to that image a bit later in the sermon.

Now consider some of the images Jesus uses in the short series of parables from today's text. Take the mustard seed in the first parable for instance. I remember first becoming aware of the mustard seed when I was a young junior high school aged 4H club member competing in the crops judging competition. One of the tasks in these competitions was to take a sample of grain from a local elevator and to carefully comb through it with a card or pencil and remove any contaminants. We'd find bits and pieces of dead and dried grasshoppers, bits of stem, chaff, and straw, but mostly what we'd find contaminating the wheat was weed seeds. A great and wide variety of them. Maybe 30 or 40 different ones could commonly be found in the wheat samples we would pore over. The current guide, "Identifying Weeds and Their Seeds," put out by the NDSU 4H and Youth Development Office lists 50. Our task was to identify each and every one of these weed seeds and list them. Some of them we classified as noxious weeds that were serious contaminants if these wheat samples were to be used as seed grain for the coming year. Among these weed seeds found in our samples were seeds of a great variety of size and shapes. Some jumped right out at you like the mushroom-esque common mallow seeds, or the obvious cockleburrs. And of course, I remember the wild mustard seeds. Tiny little pebbles, only 1/16 of an inch that would easily get lost amidst all the wheat kernels. But if you were to miss these tiny seeds and they were to go to the planter alongside the wheat, these puny little seeds could produce a wild mustard plant 3 feet tall. Or like the variety Jesus speaks of, a bush large enough to shelter the nests of birds in its boughs.

A mustard seed is an unlikely subject to illustrate something as wonderful and positive as the kingdom of heaven. After all, it is tiny, and it is a weed. But then Jesus does a similar thing with yeast, when he makes it the subject of a parable teaching, "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." In Jesus day the yeast was considered a corrupting agent, as it was taken from things that were beginning to rot and spoil to leaven flour. It also made "pure" unleavened bread, which was useful for rituals, and made it into something that was not. And my understanding from the parable is that the woman mixing bread here in three measures, is leavening enough flour to feed an army. Just like the puny weed seed, Jesus has taken something nearly invisible and a corrupting

agent and made it able to become something outsized – far beyond what you'd think – by producing bread enough to feed an abundant crowd.

Then Jesus says, "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." I wonder if you knew that a pearl is formed when an oyster is contaminated? A tiny irritant, like a piece of sand, or coral, or a little pebble gets into the oyster. And as a defense the oyster coats it in layers which harden and accrue, and after a length of time become a lustrous pearl. And in this parable, Jesus tells a story of a third thing which in this case is an irritant, a contamination, which later becomes something of great value.

The mustard seed, the yeast, the fine pearl. All of them turn out to become items of surpassing worth. Yet all of them began as worthless things – a tiny seed, a corrupting agent, an irritant in a shell. These are all interesting choices to illustrate the operation of the kingdom of heaven. Maybe Jesus was trying to teach us something about how God operates. But then didn't God speak to Isaiah and say, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," (Isaiah 55: 8). Maybe Jesus is telling us that God is able to take the small, the corrupting thing, the irritating thing, and transform them into something good and useful for God's kingdom?

For instance, 150 years ago less than a dozen Presbyterians were attending Sunday school in the newly built railroad depot in the new town of Willmar which was budding along the tracks on the prairies of Minnesota. Those few Presbyterians would incorporate a new church, only the second one founded in the city. And they were a small group, an insignificant group really. Just a mix of ordinary citizens of the new prairie town. Yet that small church that they founded would go on to become the church we know today which has nurtured, sheltered, and brought the gospel to thousands of people in its lifespan. Sort of like a puny mustard seed, insignificant at first glance, that grows to shelter the birds in its boughs.

Or take the man named Saul, who took a mandate from the Jewish officials, and traveled around from city to city rooting out these new Christians. Seeking to collect them, capture them, and take them back to Jerusalem to stand trial for their teachings about Jesus as the Messiah. This Saul, who meets Jesus on the road to Damascus, is blinded by a vision of Jesus who comes to him and offers him a new way of being – a way of light, life, beauty, truth, and

salvation, and given a new name – Paul. Paul then goes on to make it his life’s work to found churches and make disciples and becomes the greatest evangelist of the New Testament church. And just like the yeast, that which initially is seen as a corrupting agent, is transformed into something that produces a great bounty of goodness.

Or take a Jewish peasant son of a carpenter. Born into a conquered people. Of no consequence, who grew up to be an itinerant rabbi. Who was an irritant to the scribes and religious folk of his time. He debated them, challenged them, and flipped the tables of the temple. But instead of remaining small, or insignificant, or a mere irritant, he was revealed to be the greatest of teachers, a healer of the afflicted, a liberator of captives, a bearer of good news – the Messiah. And although he was taken and beaten, tortured, and crucified, by revelation of the empty tomb on that first Easter he was revealed to be the Son of God, the Savior of us all. He was revealed to be the pearl of surpassing worth, to know him and to love him, was to have that pearl as your own.

And so, I want to return to the question I asked you earlier. What is your own pearl of great worth? What do you value above all else? And in the hearing of today’s parable, I want to invite you to value knowing Jesus, and being loved by him as that greatest of treasures. A treasure so great, it surpasses any other. To follow the lead of the Apostle Paul who wrote, “What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3: 8).

Why? Because if you’re feeling small, or insignificant, or worthless, or too corrupt to redeem, or even an irritant to God or others, these parables teach that God take you, transform you by the power of God’s grace and forgiveness, and use you to produce an abundant harvest for God’s kingdom. God did it with this congregation and its humble beginnings, God did it with Saul on the road to Damascus, Jesus showed us the way with his life and teachings.

Why? Because Jesus is the source and author of all good things. He created us in love, and he took on flesh to teach us each of us – in the eyes of God – in and of ourselves a pearl of surpassing worth in our own right. Worth teaching. Worth loving. Worth healing. Worth leading. Worth redeeming. And worth dying for.

And so, the invitation is here this morning, to claim the pearl of surpassing worth, which is to know Jesus and to be known by him. To become his disciple, a sinner of his own redeeming. To walk in the light of his love and truth and claim the gift of salvation in him. May it be so for you and for me.

Alleluia and Amen.

### **Hymn of Affirmation**

#### **“How Lovely, Lord” (#402, GG)**

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How lovely, Lord, how lovely is your abiding place;  
my soul is longing, fainting, to feast upon your grace.  
The sparrow finds a shelter, a place to build her nest;  
and so your temple calls us within its walls to rest.

in you blest courts to worship, O God, a single day  
is better than a thousand if I from you should stray.  
I'd rather keep the entrance and claim you as my Lord  
than revel in the riches the ways of sin afford.

A sun and shield forever are you, O Lord Most High;  
you shower us with blessings; no good will you deny.  
The saints, your grace receiving, from strength to strength shall go,  
and from their life shall rivers of blessing overflow.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

We are on a journey of becoming  
and do not fully know how to pray.  
Yet the Spirit helps us in our weakness  
and intercedes with sighs too deep for words.  
Therefore, let us offer our prayers,  
confident that the Spirit prays in us  
according to God's will.

Holy God,  
you have blessed humanity with understanding

and the ability to choose the good;  
give to all leaders and people  
a vision of your world made whole,  
the wisdom to pursue it,  
and the will to accomplish it.

You have given your world the gift of Jesus  
to transform our suffering into healing and hope.  
Be with all who suffer hardship, distress, or need,  
and help us to honor you by serving together,  
as we grow in the mercy and compassion of Christ.

You blessed us with the gift of creation  
and call us to uphold its purpose of declaring your holy splendor.  
Join us with the Spirit's movement in caring for your world  
as together we await our redemption from glory into glory.

We give thanks for the gift of hope that never ends  
and that we are more than victors through him who loved us.  
We remember all who have died  
and give thanks that nothing can separate us from you,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And now, with the confidence of the children of God,  
we pray the prayer which Jesus taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily  
bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us  
not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**

### **Invitation to the Offering**

*Friends, we cannot pass an offering plate online. I want to thank you for  
continuing to give generously, sending your offerings to the church. Your gifts  
allow us to continue to be the church. So, I would like to take this moment to say  
thank you, and to bless the offerings you make on a regular basis: your financial  
gifts; and your lives offered to God's service. Let us pray...*

## **Offering Prayer**

Holy One,  
receive these offerings as you receive our lives.  
Gather our false starts and uncertain efforts,  
our generosity and reluctance.  
Enliven us with your breath and make your purposes known,  
that our lives might show forth your glory,  
for we pray in the name of Jesus  
and by the power of your Spirit. Amen.

## **Closing Hymn**

### **“Song of Hope” (#765, GG)**

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May the God of hope go with us every day,  
filling all our lives with love and joy and peace.  
May the God of justice speed us on our way,  
bringing light and hope to every land and race.  
Praying, let us work for peace;  
singing, share our joy with all;  
working for a world that's new,  
faithful when we hear Christ's call.

## **Charge and Benediction**

By the power of the Holy Spirit  
God has given you the gift of discernment  
to resist evil,  
choose what is good,  
and guide your feet in the way of peace.

May the God of creation, liberation, and illumination  
bless you this day and always.

Alleluia! Amen.