Over the last few weeks, we have explored parables about seeds, soil, and weeds, evil, patience, and faith. We continue with the parables in the Gospel of Matthew and step into the story of Solomon.

Today Jesus tells of his kingdom and of heaven here on earth. They are common stories about ordinary people—a tenant farmer, a housewife, fishermen—doing everyday things. The young Solomon seeks God’s guidance as he learns to govern his people.

Solomon was the youngest son of Israel’s king David and his wife Bathsheba. He was about 20 years old when he came to the throne aided by his mother, the prophet Nathan, and Zadok the priest. He had power and authority, with advisors and resources, and it wasn’t enough. In his dream God said, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon asked for, “… an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people.” Solomon’s story encourages us to turn to God when we feel overwhelmed and unsure of how to proceed. It is in our vulnerability that God has the opportunity to work through us. It is in the turning toward God that we find the balance and perspective that we seek. The assurance that we are cared for within this vast creation.

Many of you turn to God in your prayers. Some of you start each day with a morning prayer. A conversation with God about gratitude, frustrations, laments, and maybe some questions. This may be such a routine part of your life that you do not give it much thought. When we have routines, we often go about our day without giving them much thought. The mindless routine catches my attention as I pull out of my driveway and wonder if I did the routine tasks. Things like putting away the iron or closing my office door. It is a reminder that I need to slow down a bit and become more attentive to the little things.

The stories we tell ourselves can fall into this non-attentive zone. We short-form the complexities and create a simple version. Somehow our God becomes distant -somewhere in the heavens – and we become isolated here on earth. The teachings from Jesus remind us that God is present in everything and every moment of our lives.

An American preacher Keith Wagner wrote, “Most people I know believe that heaven is some far, distant place. When folks describe heaven they generally speak of some favorite place, like Myrtle Beach, Hawaii, the Smoky Mountains or a cabin in Canada. The book of the Revelation to John talks about a place where there are "streets of gold, walls with precious stones and pearl gates." Our images of heaven tend to be some form of paradise where everything is beautiful and wonderful. But here in the gospel of Matthew Jesus does not describe "heaven" as a place. He is speaking in parables and in each parable he refers to heaven as an activity. Heaven is not a destination but a journey. For Jesus, heaven has to do with planting seeds, discovering treasure, selling everything you have and being caught up in a huge net. In other words heaven is not a place where we end up but a process we participate in.”

 Jesus speaks of engaging our faith within our lives while the disciples urge him to take his place among the powerful kings and military rulers. Jesus describes the kingdom of God in simpler terms. Jesus tells of real women and men as they go about their daily lives. He describes how the everyday embodies the divine as the listener is encouraged to have ‘eyes to see’ and ‘ears to hear’. In other words, we are being nudged to wake up, to see, to hear, to be attentive. He encourages us to see the beauty of God’s creation.

Jesus brings our attention to this reality of the divine …when he heals the ill, gathers the outcast, includes women and people at all levels of society. In the parables today, the insignificant provide bountiful resources. Jesus speaks of things that are small or hidden. There are tiny seeds, the treasure hidden in a field; the large pearl hidden with ordinary pearls; the net full of fish where the good is hidden among the less desirable.

There are diverse and abundant wonders around us. Wonders that are hidden in plain sight. Wonders that may be unpredictable in their very nature and in their unfolding. Jesus catches our attention when he describes, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed"

Lori Wagner wrote, “At first, … one may feel that Jesus is describing “our job” in finding God’s hidden treasure or our responsibility to value God or the scriptures. But if you read those mini-parables carefully again, keeping in mind the context in which they are given, you find that the meaning is actually reversed. You (God’s valued disciple) are God’s treasure. You are the pearl of great price. Jesus is the seeker. … He will go to any lengths to net every fish, even rotten ones or dead ones, because he knows you are among them and that some of you are his. God will sacrifice his own son, for the sake of you. He will do anything to keep you, his beautiful, valuable pearl. Jesus so values you, that he will do anything, even give his own life, to save you and restore you. For you are that valuable to God. Jesus came to seek lost sheep, those who no longer know God but whose hearts are beautiful, those who have fallen down, those who are hidden among the crowds. God will find you.”

More often than not, we want to draw boundaries around our understanding of the divine, of heaven. We listen and settle on what feels comfortable for us and then we push away the uncomfortable. In our congregations, we yearn to find comfort in the familiar. We have familiar hymns, creeds, rituals, and buildings. We have boundaries—nice neat rows of carefully tended practices. And yet…the Spirit of God moves among us, within us, and through us. Just when we develop comfortable patterns and ways of being, there is a whisper and a nudge. Something catches our eye and our attention. We discover the familiar is being pushed to make room for something new and comfort zones need to expand.

In the moments when the familiar seems to be shifting, you may discover that your breathing has become shallow. In that moment, shift your focus onto your breathing. Take a breath, hold, then release. As I am speaking have you noticed your breathing pattern? Do you find your breath catches and releases before your lungs are filled? Be patient, practice. Give it a try now if you are able. Draw in your breath slowly. Hold … and release slowly. Now again. Inhale ….. hold… release. You can continue this as you listen. The breath of God is within you, each moment of your day. Something many of us regularly overlook and yet it is vital to our health and well being. Perhaps.. the focus on our breath helps us to develop a deeper awareness of the Spirit within and around us. When we become aware of our larger capacity… our capacity to take in more of our being, to expand our awareness of God’s creation…we become more aware of the needs … of our needs, of the needs of others. Perhaps we become aware of how our comfort in shallow breathing was not really comfortable at all – it was simply familiar.

This regular, repetitive act of being attentive to our breathing might seem to be just ordinary … yet we discover it is so much more. Just as the mustard seed is much more. Each breath allows us to be in connection with the divine when we allow ourselves to hear and to see. Matthew ‘s gospel encourages us to discover the true and expansive family that surrounds Jesus. Those who have ears to hear listen and understand.