

"The God of the Picnic"
A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2026
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

"There are few things so pleasant as a picnic eaten in perfect comfort." — W. Somerset Maugham

"A picnic is more than eating a meal; it is a pleasurable state of mind." — DeeDee Stovel

Picnics evoke wonderful romantic images in our minds. Look at the painting on the bulletin by Arthur Sarnoff. I know those folks look younger than many of us. But maybe that's how we like to think of ourselves too. We tend to forget the challenges of picnics: the ants, the wind, that surprise rain shower, wondering whether that potato salad I ate had been out in the sun too long. Picnics are also times to share family stories or personal memories.

While we have no indication they had picnics in first century Palestine at the time of Jesus, I can imagine him sharing these stories with groups of people out in the countryside. And what are his stories about? Here's Barbara Brown Taylor

Why else would [Jesus] talk about heaven in terms of farmers and fields and women baking bread and merchants buying and selling things and fishermen sorting fish, unless he meant somehow to be telling us that the kingdom of heaven has to do with these things, that our treasure is buried not in some exotic far off place that requires a special map but that "X" marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people and places and activities in our lives.

But Jesus also told these stories in parables which as we discussed last week were meant to not give black-and-white answers but to create dialogue. Emily Dickinson describes it in her poem

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant,
Success in circuit lies,
Too bright for our infirm delight
The truth's superb surprise;
As lightning to the children eased
With explanation kind,
The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.*

Jesus taught us in his parables that God's Kingdom IS here, but not yet! Perhaps the Kingdom of heaven may be best understood as a state of mind and a condition of our hearts. The reign of God can be discovered *with* us and *within* us, now and always, if we just take the time to pay attention.

Frederick Buechner reminds us in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*:

"If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God in the sense of holiness, goodness, beauty is as close as breathing and is crying out to be born both within ourselves and within the world; we would know that the Kingdom of God is what we all of us hunger for above all other things even when we don't know its name or realize that it's what we're starving to death for. The Kingdom of God is where our best dreams come from and our truest prayers. We glimpse it at those moments when we find ourselves being better than we are and wiser than we know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our own strength. The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it."

Think what it would be like if we knew at all times that the Kingdom of God lies within us and each other? If we knew, as St. Paul says to us today, "If God is for us, who can be against us". If we could have remembered that at the challenging times in our lives, like when kids picked on us at school, when we were sure we were going to fail algebra, when those first relationships just didn't work out, when we were stuck in gridlock trying to get to that important job interview on time. But that's why if we don't always need picnics, we at least need their stories. We need to hear Jesus keep reminding us that God is with us in the most ordinary of our days and efforts. And when the injustices of the world, maybe our present times in the US, seem so overwhelming to us, we need to be reminded that the Kingdom of God is also in the world, disrupting the world's machinery.

It's a mustard plant that takes over where it's not wanted, attracting birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. The Kingdom of God is leaven which is made by taking a piece of bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mold forms, working its way through everything, corrupting the whole mass of dough". Whether or not the Kingdom of God as yeast seems good news for me probably depends on whether I see myself as doing well under the status quo, or whether I yearn for change and freedom.

At the end Jesus asks them a question, "Have you understood all this?" "Yes" they say. They were lying through their teeth. You know how it is when you went to a class or a seminar and the presenter says "Does this make sense?". And it makes so little sense

you can't even formulate a question in your mind so you say "Yes". We're barely coming to terms today with the power of God to support us through adversity, the power of God's kingdom to pervade all parts of our lives, the ability to perceive God's presence in the ordinary moments of our lives.. But we continue to reflect, pray, and try to understand and even if that is slow in coming, still give thanks to this great God who is undeniably for us.