

June 14, 2026

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:44-46

44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; 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.

Sermon:

**“Glimpses of God’s Realm: Conversation with
Amy Hale and Tracy Heaton de Martinez”**

FELIPE: Friends, as part of our creative worship and connecting to worship in a meaningful way this summer, we are doing some sermons where we are inviting people to share their faith journey stories and interpretations on scripture. So I'm delighted to invite Amy Hale and Tracy Heaton de Martinez to come up here and be part of the sermon telling today.

FELIPE: As I mentioned, we, in our effort to make worship more meaningful and more connected with one another, for us to feel connected to one another, we are having an opportunity to share our stories. And so I want to invite both of you to tell us a little bit about your faith journey, about how you came to believe in Jesus and to follow his teaching. So tell us a little bit about that.

TRACY: I grew up amongst people of faith. The Mendez’s taught me mystery and beauty of the Catholic Church. The Heatons taught me potlucks and the Baptist and Methodist comfort.

AMY: I just want to preface this by saying I started to look at these questions yesterday and Grant Hale was like, don't read, don't prepare anything before. Just speak from the heart. So, advice from a politician. No, but I sort of ignored him, and I did take a look, and I was thinking about this and thinking, like, gosh, I don't know what I'm supposed to say, but the truth is that I grew up in this church, but my parents are not really very religious, so I think there have been, like, points in my life where I've embraced religion and faith and then parts where I've, like, turned away from it, so I think I'm kind of still on my faith journey, if you will, and probably... so now that I have kids and that they've, you know, like coming to church and teaching them about Jesus and, you know, obviously the goodness and kindness and all the lessons that we can get from that. I feel like I'm going through that journey with them right now.

FELIPE: What's important about faith for you?

AMY: I mean, I guess for me, coming to church on Sunday and hearing about the teachings of Jesus helps me feel like I can go throughout my week and do good things. It's not just about one day a week, but it's about how we live our lives and how we treat others.

FELIPE: Tracy, what's important about faith for you?

TRACY: My faith underlies my job, my community work. I work in a nonprofit with animals, but my faith informs that work. It's just part of how I breathe and exist, and it's part of my marriage. and how I operate in the community.

FELIPE: So we had two very brief parables about the realm of God, the kingdom of God. And I thought about both of you when I was trying to figure out who I invite to help us think about the realm of God. I thought about both of you because of stories that I know you have. So Tracy, let me start with you and ask you. Can you tell us a little bit about how you perceived the realm of God, the kingdom of God, as connected to a church that you used to be a member of in Chicago?

TRACY: As a single woman in Chicago, I was a member of Epworth United Methodist, just so you know. Methodism is not an act of rebellion for me. It is my life history. So at Epworth, our pastor would begin worship. asking us about signs of the kingdom. Did we see the kingdom in our community? Where we lived was a very poor, disinvested part of the north side of Chicago. I never understood that question, and the answers confused me even more because the kingdom at Epworth looked a little bit like the cantina scene in Star Wars. So I thought... the kingdom of God would be all gold and white and pretty. And Epworth was messy. And homeless folks worshiped with us. And potlucks were, though, a sign of the kingdom because we had pancit from the Philippine families. We had spaghetti from, I don't know, random white people. And we had African prepared chicken. Headwear was constructed out of kente cloth and Marshall field bags. And it was so challenging and wonderful for me. That's where I learned about the kingdom.

FELIPE: Amy, tell us a little bit about your work with the Peace Corps or your experience with the Peace Corps and how that experience may have helped you understand or perceive the kingdom of God in a new way.

AMY: I feel like what Tracy said kind of resonated with me because, so I was 22 and I joined the Peace Corps and I thought I was, you know, going off to like have this great adventure and experience this culture and it was going to, you know, everyone's going to love me and I was going to love everyone. And actually what I found was just a lot of poverty and a lot of dysfunction and a lot of really sad and hard and honestly terrible things that it was very hard. I mean, I almost came home. I thought maybe my... there. I was in a country in

southern Africa called Swaziland. Now, the name has since changed. It's Eswatini now, and some of you may know where it is. It's one of the little round countries that's almost surrounded on all sides by South Africa. So it didn't really feel like the kingdom of God to me. I mean, it sometimes felt really sad and hard, and kind of what you're saying about your experience, but there were like these little moments, these little glimpses of just goodness and kindness. that I think, and mostly that was from the host mother I lived with. Her name was Nomsa, and she was the greatest person. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say this in church, but she was a badass. Like, she was amazing. She was so strong and good and wonderful, and my assignment there was HIV and AIDS education, and she was raising her orphan grandchildren, who I was very concerned when I got there were probably... sick with HIV because they were really unwell. And so I had a conversation with her about maybe getting them tested and we went into the nearest town and the little boy, her grandson, Wandile, was scared to get tested. And so she sat down, pushed him out of the way, rolled up her sleeve, put out her arm and said, test me first. You know, and this is in a place where there was so much stigma and fear, you know, and she was just the strongest person I know. And so I think... You know, just similar to what you were saying. That kindness, that love for her grandson, that strength that she had, that was where I think I found God.

FELIPE: Tell me a surprising thing about your time in Africa that helped you see God differently.

AMY: When I was looking at these questions yesterday against Grant's advice I did kind of think, I did sort of go there in my mind a little bit. It was funny because like my preconceived notions of what religion would look like there were very different. And so I kind of like, I wanted to have this great cultural experience. So I went to everything, every church service. And what I found was it really wasn't that different than maybe what I imagine. Some churches are like here in the U.S., a lot of hellfire and brimstone, if you will. I accidentally ended up in an all-night tent revival, which was ... I mean, it was – I don't know. It wasn't great, okay? I was like, how can I get out of here? But with all of that, again, it – It was just all about the experience that I had with that family. That's not what I was expecting. You know what I mean? I was expecting to go and make a difference and have some kind of measurable change. And it was even at the tent revival or even at the times that were hard, it was just like what sustained me was the relationship that I built with the family and the grandmother and the grandchildren. And that, yeah, that was the most special and important part of the whole thing for me. Just the small, quiet. moments that may not sound as exciting to talk about, but they were very special to me.

FELIPE: Thank you! Tracy, I know a little bit about Epworth because we worshiped there together. I wonder if you can talk about a couple of relationships, the relationships to the children and the relationship to some of our own house neighbors in the neighborhood.

TRACY: So, Epworth, as I said, was in Uptown Edgewater, which is probably expensive now, but back then it wasn't. And the churches there formed, like, one church housed mothers and children, one church housed men. My church housed men, single men, illegally. We did not have a permit for this, and we really could not afford to do it. But the men were sleeping in our window wells, so why not? But we could not afford to heat the sanctuary and the gym where the men slept. So we closed the sanctuary and kept the gym warm for our unhoused neighbors. We worshiped in a tiny little chapel that's really pretty magnificent. And some of our unhoused neighbors would join us for worship. So the person in the pew in the tiny chapel might not smell like you, but that's okay. And then we had a neighbor show up who really loved our pastor, whose name was Kermit, for real, Kermit, Pastor Kerm. And she worried about him, so she would stand in the front of worship with her arms crossed and stare at us. And she was enormous. So no one messed with Kerm. Pastor Kerm was safe. The other thing I learned, so... Random kids would come into church because we always had great coffee hour. Pro tip, Methodists know how to do coffee hour. Y'all, you've got to learn. Yeah. When Methodists meet, we eat. So remember that. So we had amazing coffee hours. So random children would appear. And four kids came every Sunday. And they were terrible. And they'd misbehave. And they'd run around. Pastor Betty asked some of us young adults to sit with them. I was not married. I was never planning on kids. I don't know about these kids. So I'd sit with them and be like, oh, honey, no, no, no, quit that. Oh, come here. No, no. I missed church. I'm chasing children. But eventually, I carried crayons in my purse and barrettes so they could do my hair and all the things. Well, one Sunday, they weren't there. And then they weren't there the next Sunday. And they weren't there the next Sunday. So I called Illinois DCFS to ask where Donna and her siblings were. And I still remember when they asked, "what is your relationship to the child?" And I say, "I sit with her in church." Because that was a significant relationship to me and to Donna. In case you're worried, Donna was eventually adopted by friends of ours. But this is what I learned from Epworth.

FELIPE: Something about these passages, is puzzling, right? so this notion of a great pearl of great or a pearl of great value in this notion that somebody would sell everything for that pearl but if you think about what you picture the realm of God to be what would you literally or symbolically sell everything for if you could get a glimpse or be a part of the life of the of the realm

TRACY: Well, I lived in Indianapolis at the time, and I was a member of North United Methodist. It's at 38th and Meridian. It's a huge church, big, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, 50-member choir. And I left there to join Epworth. So I went from relative safety to not safe. Epworth was a few blocks from my home, but I could not walk there. That's how unsafe my neighborhood was. And it was easy to imagine the glory of God sitting in North, sitting Epworth. It was like, I'm very uncomfortable. Where's God? I don't know. So I learned to find the kingdom. I learned to find God. And now I'm not scared. And now it's pretty easy. You are lovely. But even when I'm not safe and it's not beautiful, I'm okay.

AMY: I'll be honest, I kind of struggled a little bit with this question that I did actually look at. Yeah, no, but I actually thought about it for a while because it's very similar to what you're saying, Tracy. You know, again, I thought going into the Peace Corps, I was doing something good and I was giving up all this stuff. But the truth was I was always in safety and comfort and I always had a cell phone and money. So I don't know that I'm there yet. I don't know that I can give myself enough credit that I would be willing to give up all those things. Do you know what I'm saying? Maybe that's something that I would hope that I'm striving for, to be able to say that I could put myself out there enough to go and find the realm of God in all these places and give up my worldly possessions. But again, I think that's why I come to church every Sunday, is to try to find meaning and value and to help myself to try to be a better person, maybe to get there, if that makes sense. It does.

FELIPE: Thank you. Tracy?

TRACY: I should note, I didn't know I was doing that. I moved to Chicago for a job. I thought, I'm moving up in the world. The apartment I could afford was a little dicey. The church that was nearest my apartment. was super dicey. I didn't know until I went there. So I wasn't like being bold. I was like, oh, oh, oh dear. Oh, oops. So I didn't go in with my eyes open, I will say.

FELIPE: So I think part of what I'm hearing, though, is that we don't necessarily plan on how to encounter the realm of God. We are surprised by it. And in that sense, it's that story of the person who digs up a treasure by chance. And the thing about selling everything is I think of both of you in the things that you have ventured into for the sake of justice, for the sake of abundance of a community, for the sake of seeking peace and anti-racism. So I think of you both as people who have let go, maybe not sold everything for, but let go of things and put them behind you for the sake of something that feels bigger and that you've laid it on the line. for, you know, to be able to work in medical care for people who are underprivileged and marginalized, to be able to work with nonprofits and see the gifts of

people in the community. That, to me, speaks of, you know, selling everything and buying the great pearl. You both are helping us see what that looks like.

Thanks be to God for God's word for us. Amen.