



UNION COMBINED PARISH

FALL 2026

SERMON SERIES

PARABLES OF JESUS



FALL 2026 SERMON SERIES

*What is
Church?*



SCAN QR CODE

or visit

unionboston.org/whatischurch

PASTORAL NOTE

What is Church?

It is a simple question with no simple answer. In this season of life together as the Union Combined Parish, we are asking it *not* because we believe we already know the answer, but because we trust there is something holy in the wondering together. As our congregations continue to grow, change, and discover what it means to be church with one another, we turn again to the stories of Jesus — not looking for a single definition, but listening for what these stories might reveal, unsettle, or make possible.

We are also asking the question, “What Is Church?” during a time when Christian nationalism is harming our country — and the reputation of Christianity. It’s important for us, perhaps now more than ever, to ponder together and ask the hard questions that our faith demands.

Throughout this series, our preachers will journey through the parables of Jesus alongside a series of questions about forgiveness and belonging, justice and abundance, community and care. These questions are not conclusions in disguise. They are invitations: to notice what we have assumed about church, to listen for what God might be saying among us now, and to remain open to answers we have not yet imagined.

Perhaps, then, *What is Church?* is not a question we will answer once and for all. Perhaps it is a question we learn to live together, trusting that as we gather, wonder, worship, and listen to one another, God is still showing us not only what the church is, but what the church might yet become.



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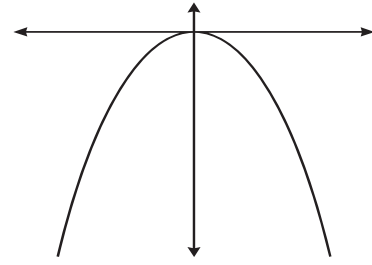
*and answer the question:
What is Church?*



PURPOSE OF

THE PARABLES

Matthew 13:10-17



^{13:10} “When the disciples came to Jesus, they asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” ¹¹ Jesus answered, “The secrets of the kingdom of heaven are for you to know...

¹³ “I use parables when I speak to the people because they look but don’t see, they listen but don’t hear or understand. ¹⁴ Isaiah’s prophecy is being fulfilled in them, which says,

*‘You will be ever listening, but never understanding;
you will be ever looking, but never perceiving.*

*¹⁵ For this people’s heart
has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts
and turn back to me,
and I would heal them.’*

¹⁶ “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ The truth is, many prophets and holy people longed to see what you see but never saw it, to hear what you hear but never heard it.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

**HOW DO THE PARABLES HELP US
UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF “CHURCH” ?**

**“A Different Kind
of Speech”**

REV. DR. JAY WILLIAMS



PARABLE OF

THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20:1-16



^{20:1} “The kingdom of heaven is like the owner of an estate who went out at dawn to hire workers for the vineyard. ² After reaching an agreement with them for the usual daily wage, the owner sent them out to the vineyard. ³ “About mid-morning, the owner came out and saw others standing around the marketplace without work, ⁴ and said to them, ‘You go along to my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is fair.’ ⁵ At that they left. “Around noon and again in the mid-afternoon, the owner came out and did the same. ⁶ Finally, going out late in the afternoon, the owner found still others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’

⁷ “‘No one has hired us,’ they replied. “The owner said, ‘You go to my vineyard, too.’

⁸ “When evening came, the owner said to the overseer, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay, but begin with the last group and end with the first.’ ⁹ When those hired late in the afternoon came up, they received a full day’s pay, ¹⁰ and when the first group appeared they assumed they would get more. Yet they all received the same daily wage. ¹¹ “Thereupon they complained to the owner, ¹² ‘This last group did only an hour’s work, but you’ve put them on the same basis as those who worked a full day in the scorching heat.’ ¹³ “‘My friends,’ said the owner to those who voiced this complaint, ‘I do you no injustice. You agreed on the usual wage, didn’t you? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go home. I intend to give this worker who was hired last the same pay as you. ¹⁵ I’m free to do as I please with my money, aren’t I? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶ “Thus the last will be first and the first will be last.”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

**HOW DO WE LIVE DIFFERENTLY FROM
THE EXPLOITATIVE WAYS OF THIS WORLD?**

“An Alternative
Community
by Grace”

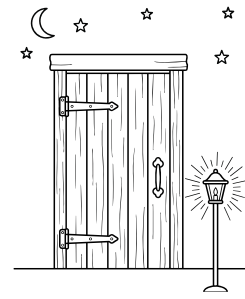
REV. KYLE WALDEN



PARABLE OF

THE FRIEND AT NIGHT

Luke 11:5-13



^{11:5} Jesus said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, a neighbor, and you go to your neighbor at midnight and say, ‘Lend me three loaves of bread,’ ⁶ because friends of mine on a journey have come to me, and I have nothing to set before them.’

⁷ “Then your neighbor says, ‘Leave me alone. The door is already locked and the children and I are in bed. I can’t get up to look after your needs.’” ⁸ I tell you, though your neighbor will not get up to give you the bread out of friendship, your persistence will make your neighbor get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹ “That’s why I tell you, keep asking and you’ll receive; keep looking and you’ll find; keep knocking and the door will be opened to you.” ¹⁰ For whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, is admitted.

¹¹ What parents among you will give a snake to their child when the child asks for a fish, ¹² or a scorpion when the child asks for an egg? ¹³ If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will our heavenly Abba give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE WHEN WE GATHER?

“The Miracle of
Gathering”

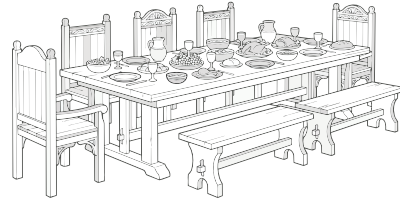
REV. NIKKI RENÉE



PARABLE OF

THE GREAT DINNER

Luke 14:12-24



^{14:12} Then Jesus said to the host, “Whenever you give a lunch or dinner, don’t invite your friends or colleagues or relatives or wealthy neighbors. They might invite you in return and thus repay you. ¹³ No, when you have a reception, invite those who are poor or have physical infirmities or are blind. ¹⁴ You should be pleased that they can’t repay you, for you’ll be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

¹⁵ One of the guests heard this and said to Jesus, “Happy are those who eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

¹⁶ Jesus responded, “A landowner was giving a large dinner and sent out many invitations. ¹⁷ At dinnertime, the landowner instructed an aide to say to those invited, ‘Come to the feast, everything is ready.’ ¹⁸ But they began to excuse themselves, each and every one. The first one said to the aide, ‘I’ve just bought some land, and I need to go out and inspect it. Please send my regrets.’ ¹⁹ Another said, ‘I’ve just bought five yoke of oxen, and I need to go out and test them. Please excuse me.’ ²⁰ A third said, ‘I’ve just gotten married, so of course I can’t come.’

²¹ “The aide returned and reported all this to the landowner. The landowner became angry and said to the aide, ‘Go into town, into the streets and alleys, and bring in those who are poor or crippled, and those who are blind or lame.’ ²² After doing so, the aide reported, ‘Your orders have been carried out, and there’s still room.’ ²³ The landowner then said to the aide, ‘Go out and scour the side roads and the back roads and make them come in. I want my house to be full! ²⁴ But I tell you, not one of those I had initially invited will taste a bite of my dinner.’ ”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

WHAT EXCUSES DO WE USE TO OPT OUT OF COMMUNITY? AND WHO IS MISSING AROUND OUR TABLE?

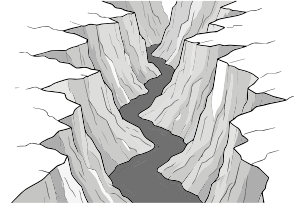
“Inconvenient and Inclusive Grace”

REV. KYLE WALDEN



PARABLE OF

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS



Luke 16:19-31

^{16:19} “Once there was a rich person who dressed in purple and linen and feasted splendidly every day. ²⁰ At the gate of this person’s estate lay a beggar named Lazarus, who was covered with sores. ²¹ Lazarus longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich person’s table, and even the dogs came and licked Lazarus’ sores. ²² One day poor Lazarus died and was carried by the angels to the arms of Sarah and Abraham. The rich person likewise died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, in torment, the rich person looked up and saw Sarah and Abraham in the distance, and Lazarus resting in their company.

²⁴ “‘Sarah and Abraham,’ the rich person cried, ‘have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am tortured by these flames!’ ²⁵ But they said, ‘My child, remember that you were well off in your lifetime, while Lazarus was in misery. Now Lazarus has found consolation here, and you have found torment. ²⁶ But that’s not all. Between you and us there is a fixed chasm, so that those who might wish to come to you from here can’t do so, nor can anyone cross from your side to us.’

²⁷ “The rich person said, ‘I beg you, then, to send Lazarus to my own house ²⁸ where I have five siblings. Let Lazarus be a warning to them, so that they may not end in this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Sarah and Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let your siblings hear them.’ ³⁰ ‘Please, I beg you,’ the rich person said, ‘if someone would only go to them from the dead, then they would repent.’ ³¹ ‘If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets,’ Sarah and Abraham replied, ‘they won’t be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead!’”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

WHAT WHAT DO WE OWE TO ONE ANOTHER?

“The View from
The Other Side”

REV. NIKKI RENÉE



PARABLE OF

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES



Matthew 13:24-30

^{13:34} Jesus presented another parable to those gathered: “The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer who sowed good seed in a field. ²⁵ While everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then made off. ²⁶ When the crop began to mature and yield grain, the weeds became evident as well.

²⁷ “The farmer’s workers came and asked, ‘Did you not sow good seed in your field? Where are the weeds coming from?’

²⁸ “The farmer replied, ‘I see an enemy’s hand in this.’ “They in turn asked, ‘Do you want us to go out and pull them up?’

²⁹ “ ‘No,’ replied the farmer, ‘if you pull up the weeds, you might take the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let them grow together until the harvest, then at harvest time I will order the harvesters first to collect the weeds and bundle them up to burn, then to gather the wheat into my barn.’ ”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

HOW DO WE DISCERN THE TRUTH TOGETHER?

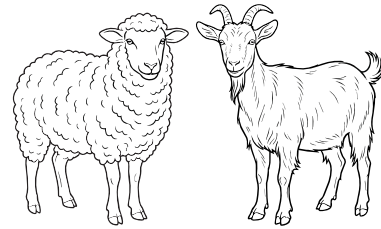
“Holy Conferencing
and Discernment”

REV. KYLE WALDEN



PARABLE OF

SHEEP AND GOATS



Matthew 25:31-46

^{25:31} “At the appointed time the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit upon the royal throne, ³² with all the nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. ³³ The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left.

³⁴ “The ruler will say to those on the right, ‘Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world!’ ³⁵ For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; ³⁶ naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.’ ³⁷ Then these just will ask, ‘When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink?’ ³⁸ When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness?’ ³⁹ When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?’ ⁴⁰ The ruler will answer them, ‘The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me.’

⁴¹ “Then the ruler will say to those on the left, ‘Out of my sight, you accursed ones! Into that everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and the fallen angels!

⁴² I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. ⁴³ I was a stranger and you gave me no welcome; naked and you gave me no clothing. I was ill and in prison and you did not come to visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they in turn will ask, ‘When did we see you hungry or thirsty, or homeless or naked, or ill or in prison, and not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ The answer will come, ‘The truth is, as often as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ They will go off to eternal punishment, and the just will go off to eternal life.”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

**WHY SHOULD WE DO GOOD WORKS?
HOW DO WE CARE FOR EACH OTHER?**

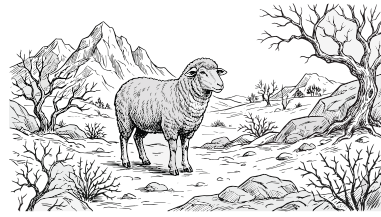
**“Good News for
Brokenhearted”**

REV. DR. JAY WILLIAMS



PARABLE OF

THE LOST SHEEP



Luke 15:3-7

^{15:3} Jesus then addressed this parable to them: ⁴“Who among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, doesn’t leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and search for the lost one until it’s found? ⁵And finding it, you put the sheep on your shoulders in jubilation. ⁶Once home, you invite friends and neighbors in and say to them, ‘Rejoice with me! I’ve found my lost sheep!’ ⁷I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER WE ARE FOUND?

“On Coming Home”

REV. NIKKI RENÉE



PARABLE OF

THE SOWER



Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

^{13:1} Later that day, Jesus left the house and sat down by the lake shore. ² Such great crowds gathered that he went and took a seat in a boat, while the crowd stood along the shore. ³ He addressed them at length in parables:

“One day, a farmer went out sowing seed. ⁴ Some of the seed landed on a footpath, where birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some of the seed fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. This seed sprouted at once since the soil had no depth, ⁶ but when the sun rose and scorched it, it withered away for lack of roots. ⁷ Again, some of the seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. ⁸ And some of it landed on good soil, and yielded a crop thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown. ⁹ Let those who have ears to hear, hear this!”

¹⁸ “Now listen to the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When people hear the message about the kingdom of God without understanding it, the Evil One comes along and snatches away what was sown in their hearts. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ Those who received the seed that fell on rocky ground are the ones who hear the word and at first welcome it with joy. ²¹ But they have no roots, so they last only for a while. When some setback or persecution comes because of the message, they quickly fall away. ²² Those who receive the message that fell among the thorns are the ones who hear the word, but then worldly anxieties and the lure of wealth choke it off, and the message produces no fruit. ²³ But those who receive the seed that fell on rich soil are those who hear the message and understand it. They produce a crop that yields a hundred, or sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

WHERE ARE WE PLANTED?

HOW DO WE GROW OUR CHURCH?

“To Listen Well”

REV. DR. JAY WILLIAMS



PARABLE OF

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Luke 18:9-14



^{18:9} Jesus spoke this parable addressed to those who believed in their own self-righteousness while holding everyone else in contempt: ¹⁰ “Two people went up to the Temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed like this: ‘I give you thanks, O God, that I’m not like others—greedy, crooked, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn.’ ¹³ “The other one, however, kept a distance, not even daring to look up to heaven. In real humility, all the tax collector said was, ‘O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴ Believe me, the tax collector went home from the Temple right with God, while the Pharisee didn’t. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

WHAT IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR?

“On Being Right”

REV. NIKKI RFNÉE

