

Third Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Ezekiel 17:22-24 2 Corinthians 5:6-17 Mark 4:26-34
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
June 13, 2021

My default picture of the Kingdom of God is from the last chapters of Revelation: the vast city of God, beautiful and bright and filled with music and worship and praise. But then I hear what Jesus says in today's gospel: The kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that can grow into a surprisingly big shrub. Those are two very different pictures of heaven, aren't they! Well, Jesus is obviously not talking about the Kingdom of God as we will see it. He's helping us think about the Kingdom of God as we have it *now*, in this broken world, in Grove City, Ohio. Through his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus has made us full citizens of that beautiful future kingdom. But here in this broken world, we have that kingdom through faith in Jesus. It's not something we generally see with our eyes. Visually, it's not glorious fireworks. It's like a seed that grows into a bush, and if you've seen mustard bushes, they're frankly kind of scrubby looking. And we also know they're invasive bushes—we'll get to that later.

Let's talk about that image of the tiny seed, first. A seed of any bush or plant or tree contains the blueprint of the final product. In a sense, the entire plant is contained within the tiniest seed. So we have the whole kingdom. Like we sing in Luther's hymn: "the Kingdom's ours forever!" That means the whole package. Our salvation is complete. But right now it helps to think of having the kingdom in seed form. For starters, that helps us remember that before we get to heaven, God has given us the job of planting the seed of that future in this world. It's interesting: today's gospel is not the only place where Jesus describes the Word of God as a seed we scatter. I love that because it reminds me, we don't have to worry too much about where it falls, as long as we're getting the news about Jesus out there. Don't let too much planning get in the way of talking about Jesus as often and to as many people as you can. It's that simple.

The image of the tiny seed also helps us see how God works in this world, through small things that the world might miss or discount. It's like the sacrament of communion. With our eyes, we see just a little tiny bit of bread and a tiny sip of wine. But in faith we know that's the body and blood of Jesus. As we trust his words, "this is my body, this is my blood," we can be sure that in that little hors-d'oeuvre—that little appetizer—we are getting a foretaste of the full meal of heaven. So in this world, we experience the kingdom through small things, but God uses those small things that might otherwise seem of no account, to open us up to eternal life. And it helps us to think that everything we do here at St. John's is a manifestation of God's kingdom, but always in seed form.

Jesus is obviously teaching us see *little things* differently. A sip of wine, a piece of bread, a mustard seed. An act of caring. Simple words of encouragement. Everyday things. They might not even register unless your eyes are open to them. But with Jesus, those little things become the instruments through which God reaches us. Jesus even compares himself to a little seed. He's talking about himself in the gospel of John when he says: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it

dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus is saying he became one small human being... a little seed who like all of us ultimately died and went back into the earth. And he did that on a lonely hill outside the walls of Jerusalem, outside the mainstream Roman world. In the eyes of the world at large, it was not worth mentioning... just another person dying. But that was how God chose to save us—by becoming small and of no account. That’s where God reconnected himself with this world and with you and me in his fullest and final act of salvation. And then he relied on small, mortal creatures—people like you and me—to tell the whole world what had happened.

So as believers, we’re going to see things differently. Where the rest of the world sees nothing that can help it stay alive, we see *seeds from God*, the source of life. God attaches himself to little things. The whole kingdom comes to us through surprising instruments. Can you get any more surprising than a cross?! We receive the kingdom of God in all of its fullness—but it came to us out of that instrument of death and torture and hopelessness. Isn’t that cross exactly what the world is trying to get away from all the time, cover up, ignore, because in our fear and sin we can only see nothingness there. But you and I look at the cross and we know who died on one. So now we look at all the crosses of this world, and we see possibilities. We see potential.

That’s like a basic character trait of Christians. If Jesus is there in that death and suffering, like he says he is, I can expect a new life to come, even out of that place. That doesn’t mean I like suffering. What it means is that my crucified Savior is there with me in the middle of it. If he’s there with me in that hell—I will also rise with him. Even though I’ve got nothing but tears and pain, through him I will beat it too. Likewise, when I’m standing at the side of a grave of my loved one, where other broken human beings will see nothingness and separation there, or where they might put on rose-colored glasses so they don’t have to see the nothingness there—as a believer in Jesus I see that nothingness full-on. That’s where my Savior went. Total death. Total separation. Non-being. But I also remember Jesus’ words: “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” (John 10). I see Jesus in death. Because he is there first, that’s not a dead-end; it’s the gate.

Obviously we’re going to see people differently, too, as believers who see *seeds of God’s Kingdom* where other people see nothing. We’ll see God’s saving power at work, even in the weakness and brokenness of other people. Like Paul says in the 2nd lesson: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see everything has become new!” So in Christ, I’m not going to need to surround myself with people who are going to build Seth up anymore. I’m going to see human differently. Jesus in Matthew 25 tells us where we’re going to find him in this world. He says: “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked and sick and in prison.” So now instead of using other people to build ourselves up, we can confidently give what we’ve got for our neighbors. What a beautiful thing, that we can see Jesus, our crucified savior, in other people. No more wasted energy, trying to keep ourselves in the shiny successful crowd, however that used to look for us.

And finally, the shrub Jesus describes growing out of the mustard seed is a really helpful image of God's church. I'm looking at the shrub right now. You and I, as believers, are the visible growth that comes out of the seed of the gospel. Just as Jesus says, "the birds of the air can make nests" in the branches of the mustard bush, God has given us refuge here in each other; we want people in Grove City to know that they have a place of rest and refuge and encouragement here at St. John's. As long as we are rooted in Christ, as long as we manifest the DNA of the seed that we grow out of, people will find more than a refuge here—they'll find a fountain gushing up with eternal life. It's easy to think of St. John's as a big 170 year old oak tree. But that picture is not really true to reality. You and I are just one more wave of invasive Jesus shrubs that have passed through this place from generation to generation. And more shrubs will come after us. Shrubs shed their branches and grow new ones more quickly than a tree. Any congregation right now is a very different shrub than what was growing in the same location just a few decades ago. So healthy congregations are always dying and rising. That's what the faithful baptismal journey looks like. A congregation that's trying to keep itself alive in the sense of desperately propping up every branch of an old oak tree—that's a futile struggle for survival. Shrubs on the other hand, are geared to let the dead branches fall quickly because they're wired to invade new territory. The church—by our DNA—we were wired by Jesus from the beginning to be an invasive shrub. Something to think about.

Over and over, in the gospels, we see that Jesus looked at everything and everyone around him from a surprising perspective. He saw possibilities where others saw only limitations. He saw paths to freedom where others saw a prison. He saw life where others saw only death. Everything you read about Jesus shows him moving towards a shocking ending that blows apart all our preconceptions about life and death. And with Jesus, we're not just talking about our perceptions of things; he's not just a good example for us. He's God. That's the way he sees things. And he has given you and me resurrection from the dead—now we can see things his way. We see seeds of the coming kingdom, all around us.