

6.16.2024 Pentecost 4

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Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

“You are a new creation”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus’ parable about the mustard seed in today’s gospel is a parable about the kingdom of God. It’s not the other familiar parable comparing the mustard seed to faith; rather, Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God he reveals in the world and within us.

The first image in today’s parable is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, which sprouts, grows, and leads to a harvest. In the second image, the kingdom of God is compared to a tiny, yet marvelous mustard seed, which grows into a great tree with branches offering refuge to the birds of the air who make their nests in its shade. Revealing the kingdom of God is the central work of Jesus, who began his ministry, proclaiming, “*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news*” (Mk. 1:15).

The phrase “*kingdom of God*” is about the kingship, authority, and rule of God, visible in this world, known in the human heart, and always expressed through human hands and voices! The kingdom of God is, of course, always understood against the kingdoms, authority, and leaders of this world who also assert themselves as absolute, even eternal, demanding loyalty, and even fealty, from their subjects and citizens. To live as a Christian amid the kingdoms of this world is what makes the ancient confession, “*Jesus is Lord*” so powerful and even dangerous (see 1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11).

Early Christians were very aware that their confession, “*Jesus is Lord*,” placed his kingdom over and against all other kingdoms of this world. Confessing “*Jesus is Lord*” put them at odds with the ancient Roman confession, “*Caesar is Lord*.” (see Pliny the Younger, Letter to Trajan X: 96, and the Church Fathers work titled, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, chapter 8). As modern people, we have lost a sense urgency, and even danger, in confessing *Jesus is Lord* amid the kingdoms of this world.

As we think about Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, we also remember Jesus’ words, “*the kingdom of God is within you*” (Lk. 17:21). The kingdom that Jesus reveals is present within us through faith, “*for we walk by faith, not by sight*.” The kingdom of God dwelling within you is a transforming reality, like a tiny mustard seed, growing all your life, allowing you to confess, “*Jesus is Lord*,” while always urging you to act with his love in this world.

Paul describes God’s kingdom within us, writing, “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new*

*creation, everything old has passed away!”* The God who created time and space, infinity and eternity, and who created the cosmos, is creating the infinite kingdom of love within you. You are a new creation already containing God’s infinite kingdom alive in you.

As spiritual people, created to know God, we long for transcendence, yet we are also human beings planted firmly on this earth. We long to love and to be loved; we long for peace and a just world; we hope for a reign of true brotherhood and sisterhood among all peoples and nations. Each day, God’s vision of a kingdom of love urges us on so we might live for Christ and for our neighbor.

Yet at the same time, we also know how profoundly broken and sinful the human kingdoms of this world are. The kingdoms of this world are constantly at each other’s throats. Tragically, nations are at war with one another, while partisan fighting and enmity in our own nation remind us of the brokenness and selfish power of the kingdoms of this world. To be a Christian is to *walk by faith not by sight*; it is to center my life in Christ, over and above, all other kingdoms and would-be kingmakers in this world.

Yet amid the troubles of this world and the inability of governments and nations to care for their own and their neighbors, I am overjoyed every Sunday when I gather in this sacred space with you, because the kingdom of God is alive and visible in this congregation. All of us know the story of Peter’s great confession to Jesus, “*You are the Messiah*” (Mk. 8:29; Mt. 16:16; Lk. 9:20), yet at first, Peter was unable to accept Jesus’ kingdom in his heart. Peter imagined God’s kingdom to be like the kingdoms of this world, rather than a kingdom of discipleship, self-denial, and service to others. And yet, Jesus promised to build his church upon Peter, giving him “*the keys of the kingdom*” (Mt. 16:19). Every Sunday, I look out upon this congregation with joy because Jesus reveals the kingdom in us and in his church in this place. God is using your life to reveal God’s kingdom of love and mercy to all people in this city of Charlotte and to this world God so loves.

Like a tiny mustard seed, a church can seem small and even puny against the kingdoms of this world, and yet God’s kingdom is like a mustard tree, always growing outward, offering refuge and safety. This is what we do as a church, in welcoming all people into this sanctuary, a place of refuge and peace – a place where we can once again hear the voice of Jesus speaking within us, “*You are a new creation. The kingdom is within you.*”

Yet amid all the other competing voices calling for our attention and allegiance, listening to the voice of Jesus is not easy in this increasingly noisy world. Every voice in this world must be

compared with Jesus' voice; every kingdom in this world compared to his kingdom of grace and love. The sad and tragic images of death and dying we see daily in this world can be overwhelming. The news is full of it. Lovingly written obituaries celebrate the lives of people who have done new and good things in this world, and yet, daily, we also see countless images of other often unknown lives taken by violence and war.

Five brief words that Paul speaks today are the very heart of the gospel message: "*And he died for all.*" There are no exceptions, Jesus died and was raised for every person in this world. Yet the world finds God's kingdom of love hard to accept. The world continues to tell us who to love and who to hate, who to accept and who to reject. Yet the words, "*And he died for all,*" offer comfort and knowledge, that in Jesus, no one ever dies unknown and forgotten.

Like a mustard seed, the kingdom is growing within you. In Christ, your life has purpose and meaning. In a world continually rocked by age-old enmity, strife, and war, in Christ you are a new creation. You carry the infinite and eternal kingdom of God's love wherever you go.

Christ needs you. You are branches of his kingdom reaching outward, offering refuge, hope, and love to those in need.

In a world fearful of death and dying, Jesus' cross and resurrection stand unexpectedly next to one another. In Jesus, death always moves into new life. He lives that you might never die.

In Christ, you are made a new creation so that you might stand unexpectedly next to your neighbor offering new life, hope, and love. Amen.