

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (2020)

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One of the central themes inherent to most religious traditions is the need for transformation of ourselves and our world. We all have some sense that the world in which we live suffers under the weight of one injustice or another. This awareness is deeply felt by many. Just look at the passion of those who strive for ecological, racial, and social justice: they rightly feel in the depths of their souls the need for us to make things right. This growing realisation of social and environmental injustice has given rise to powerful movements around the globe.

Yet for every step forward we seem to take a step backwards. Despite our best efforts to make things right in the world, we seem to find ourselves not only back to the original problems, but sometimes even in a more dreadful state than before. We're trapped in a never-ending cycle of sin and death that appears to have no end to it.

While we may think of our time as unique, many of the issues we wrestle with today were long experienced by our ancestors in the centuries and millennia before us. Consider the period in which God became incarnate in Jesus: the vast majority of people living at that time experienced the weight of Roman oppression. Few enjoyed the basic luxuries we take for granted today. In fact, the people of Israel had long suffered under the oppression of foreign rulers. They longed for freedom and prayed for a king to save them, a Messiah who would one day restore Israel and justice in the land of God's people.

It was into such a world that Jesus came and preached the Good News of God's reign and the liberation of God's people from sin and evil. To be sure, the injustices our early Jewish and Christian ancestors felt was driven by sin. For the world to be transformed by God's grace, humanity must begin to acknowledge its sinful desires of pride, selfishness, and greed. Only then could the grace of God begin to work within us.

Over the past two weeks I've reflected with you upon our need to let go of our passions and desires and to seek the good, the true, and the beautiful. I've also spoken of God working within us, removing all that holds us back from his love and grace. This week, I speak of the in-breaking of God's kingdom and its transformation of us and our world.

To understand the appointed reading from Matthew's Gospel today, we have to appreciate the historical context in which it is written. Matthew is a devout Jewish disciple of Jesus writing to a Jewish community in Antioch, in what is modern day Syria. He is writing to an early community of disciples, a community well versed in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). From what scholars can gather, Matthew's Gospel takes on its written form sometime in the period between 70 and 90 AD. The gospel story existed before then, albeit in oral form.

The time period in which Matthew's Gospel is written is significant: it is after the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The oppression felt by the Jewish community prior to the destruction of the Temple was amplified by the brutality of the Roman attack on Jerusalem. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, an estimated 1.1 million people were killed in the four-month siege of Jerusalem. While modern day archeologists and historians question that number, there is a general sense that thousands lost their lives in the attack. Those not killed in the onslaught were often sold as slaves or imprisoned.

The destruction of the Temple left a terrible wound upon the people, one still felt by the Jewish people and observed today as countless Jews line up and pray before the one remaining wall of the base of the Temple, the Wailing Wall. If we feel pained by not being able to worship together in our churches, imagine the agony we would feel if someone vandalised and destroyed our sacred spaces; we would be forever changed. Such was the case with the Jewish people. By some accounts, Judaism experienced a radical transformation after the fall of the Temple.

Jesus' parables, spoken three decades earlier, carried new weight and meaning in the aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction. The parables we hear today were significant for those living in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction. The early Christian community, the early disciples of Jesus had to grapple with Jesus' teaching to better understand their meaning. In particular, what does Jesus mean when he speaks of the kingdom of heaven?

Again, to better understand this text, we need to consider the historical context. When the ancient Israelites heard of the Kingdom of God, they imagined the restoration of Israel to its former glory as experienced in the days of King David. David was considered the greatest king in Israel's history. As king, David was anointed; he was a messiah (remember what I said about the word messiah — it means "anointed one," which in Greek is *Khristós* or Christ). After David, Israel sadly was divided and occupied by one empire after another. As the people suffered under the weight of foreign leaders and their religions, they longed for God's kingdom to be restored once again.

Jesus is confronted with this narrative and was often asked by his listeners what he means when says his kingdom shall come. If he is the Messiah, the promised one of God, then the people expected Jesus to bring about God's Kingdom. But that doesn't happen. In fact, Jesus is quite clear with his students, or disciples, that the kingdom he inaugurates is unlike any kingdom imagined before by humanity.

Jesus tests the people's understanding of kingdom not only with his explicit words that he has not come to establish a political reign, he uses a series of parables that challenge the people's conception of God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven. Recall what I said last week about parables — they are not simply stories used to convey a point, but rather rhetorical devices much like riddles. They confound us more than they help us understand. Believe me when I say parables bewilder us rather than offer clarity; I was once at a clergy conference on parables and there was more debate about the meaning of parables than I'd ever heard in my life. Most of us left wondering if we even really knew what the parables were about.

Despite the puzzling nature of parables, we can ascertain some basic ideas given our study of the people and culture at the time. To illustrate this, I want to focus on two of the parables Jesus tells his disciples and that Matthew shares with us in his gospel.

The first is the parable of the mustard seed. To be fair, the mustard seed isn't actually the smallest seed in ancient Israel; instead the seed of the cypress tree was much smaller. However, the mustard seed was proverbial for smallness, used frequently by the Jewish people of the day. Despite its miniature size, the mustard seed grows into a tree as tall as twelve feet high in an arid environment. Furthermore, mustard bushes attracted birds because of the tree's black seeds. In some instances, clouds of birds will gather on its branches.

Jesus' use of the mustard seed illustrated features of the kingdom of heaven. First, God's kingdom will begin small. The greatest of things must always begin with the smallest beginnings. This image was in stark contrast to the vast and mighty Roman Empire. Secondly, the tree offers a word of comfort to the disciples: unlike the kingdoms of this world, God's kingdom will serve as a place of rest and nourishment for us, just as the mustard bush provides for the birds. Again, this would've sharply contrasted with the image of the Roman Empire, a kingdom that did not protect or sustain the ancient Israelites, but rather burdened the people and ultimately killed them. Finally, the tree illustrates how God's kingdom will slowly grow with time and eventually spread out across the world to all the nations.

The disciples and early Christian community would've found much consolation in this passage. They were but a small band of believers who were drawn to a kingdom barely noticeable to the world. In time, however, the saving power of the kingdom will grow and become a place of rest and comfort for many. Surely, such words would've given them hope and encouragement not only in Jesus' time but in the early years of the Church's growth.

Jesus continues to further deepen the disciples' understanding of the kingdom of heaven with the parable of leaven. Unlike the previous parable, the parable of leaven would have puzzled Jesus' listeners. While I know most of us are desperately in search of yeast during this pandemic, the Jews of Jesus' day would've looked less fondly upon leaven for they associated it with decay and rot. In fact, leaven almost always was associated with evil influence. Certainly, Jesus' comparison of the kingdom of heaven with leaven would've shocked and disturbed his listeners. For that reason, though, it would've also aroused considerable interest and attention.

In time, however, his listeners would've appreciated the point Jesus was making: the transforming power of the kingdom of heaven. Unleavened bread is like a cracker, hard, dry, and uninteresting; bread baked with leaven is soft, tasty, and good to eat. The leaven causes a transformation in the dough, just as the coming of the kingdom causes a transformation in life.

Again, we must not forget that the process is slow and must be given adequate time for transformation, as any baker knows, one must let the dough rest so it can rise. Moreover, the transformation caused by God's kingdom is often unseen. While we may desperately yearn for the new life in the kingdom, it may not be fully realised in our time. The kingdom demands our patience and willingness to let it transform us, removing all that prohibits us from loving God and our neighbour and experiencing the fullness of life God intended us to share.

Jesus' parables of the mustard seed and leaven offer us profound insight into the kingdom of heaven. They also echo themes we've discussed several times before. So what can we learn about the Kingdom of God from Jesus' parables?

First, the in-breaking of God's kingdom is a process, not a one-time event. While I know you've heard me say this countless times before, I'll say it again: we live in a liminal time. God's kingdom was inaugurated with Jesus' incarnation, yet it has yet to be realised in our time. We stand at the threshold of two different ages. As some Christian writers like to say, we live in the "already-but-not-yet" time. We know Christ

has won for us our salvation, yet we still feel the pain and suffering of a world wounded by sin. Thus Jesus' words at the end of the parables today turn apocryphal as he speaks of the end of the age. While the images Jesus uses may strike fear within us, they are truly words of hope. In Biblical terms, the word apocryphal means to reveal, disclose, to pull back the curtain. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God will be realised one day and all that is not of God's kingdom — oppression, hatred, vice, and pride — will be abolished. That is a good thing, for we see today the destructive power of these evils in racism, the marginalisation and objectification of persons, and the perpetuation of social-economic inequalities by uncontrolled capitalism, to name but a few.

The second point we learn follows from the first: although we are to live in love and charity with one another, to confront injustice, and to care for God's people and creation, we will not realise the Kingdom of God by our own power but rather by the grace of God. Unfortunately there developed a utopian idea in the late 19th century that human civilisation is in an upward trajectory and the world will one day be a happy place where all will prosper. In fact, capitalism inherently holds this belief. Champions of capitalism often argue that we're all going to live better, more prosperous lives as we develop. There's growing evidence that is not the case, and in fact, our progress and development has always meant some will not enjoy the fruits of their labours. Just look at the growing divide between the few who are rich and the many who are poor.

Strangely, the belief that the world was only going to get better through our work was embraced by Christians in the 1960s and remains subtly present to this day. Some argued that we are to do all we can to realise God's kingdom today through our works of justice and peace. While a noble effort, some forgot it is God alone who, as we heard Fleming Rutledge say last week, makes all things right. What that means for us Christians is that all we do, every social justice and charitable act, must first begin with our total dependence upon God. Our liturgy reflects this: we come together to be fed by Christ in Word and Sacrament and are then compelled to go out to proclaim the Good News of Christ through word and action. We must be continually nurtured

and sustained by God if we are to do God's work in the world. We can do nothing by our own power, but we can do all things only with the grace of God.

The third and final point we learn from this gospel lesson echoes a theme we heard last week: with God's kingdom comes judgement and all that is not of God will be tossed into the abyss. I'm often struck by how many of us find these final words unpleasant and disturbing. Don't get me wrong, I too struggle with Jesus' talk of the angels separating evil from good and tossing it into the furnace of fire. But I can't help but think that my unease, and perhaps our unease with this text, is due in part to the fact that we all realise deep down inside that there is some part of us that is still in need of transformation. Again, the Christian Tradition is clear that we are innately good; however, it also affirms that all of us are in need of God's grace and redemption.

God's kingdom transforms us and the world around us. For that transformation to occur, we must be willing to co-operate with God's grace. God will never force God's self upon us, but God will call and invite us to live the way of eternal life. Our response to the kingdom life is to not only walk in the path of Jesus, the way of love, but to humbly acknowledge our weaknesses and the wrongs we have done, and learn from God the way we are to go.

One of the greatest practices of our Christian tradition is spiritual direction. Through spiritual direction we sit with a soul-friend with whom we can honestly share how we hear God speaking to us in life and how God is calling us to change. A good spiritual director will listen attentively to God's activity in your life and encourage you to be attentive to the small voice of God calling you in the night.

If you're unable to find a spiritual director (please know Wilma Clarke and I are willing to help you find one or even to walk with you), I encourage you to identify a friend with whom you can trust and with whom you can honestly talk about the joys and challenges of your faith life. Share with that person the areas in your life that are in need of God's healing and ask that person to challenge you to listen to God's voice.

Believe me, I have two friends with whom I share such a friendship and both challenge me to be a better human being and priest.

Finally, know the Church also has sacramental celebrations of healing, particularly the sacrament of reconciliation, more commonly known as confession. While I know we Anglicans don't talk much about confession, it is still very much a sacrament of the Church. In fact, the Lutheran and Anglican Reformers of the 16th century still saw the sacrament as important to the Christian life. However, the sacrament was not considered compulsory or absolute for the Christian life. Instead, there's an old Anglican saying that sums up the Anglican perspective of the sacrament: "All can, some should, none must." In other words, we don't require it, but we strongly encourage the celebration of the sacrament.

As a disciple of Jesus, I've found the sacrament to be helpful in my own spiritual life. I often find I need to have the humility to name the ways in which I have not loved God and my neighbour and to be honest with myself. The honesty allows me to be open to the transformation that God seeks to do within me. Admittedly, while I try to go regularly, I know I perhaps should go more often, for the joy and freedom I feel upon hearing my priest confessor say to me "your sins are forgiven" lifts a weight off my shoulder

Let me be clear, God desires for you and I to live life to the full. Ultimately, God's kingdom will liberate us from all that oppresses us. In the meantime, however, we must be willing to let that kingdom begin transforming us here and now and be open to the new life that God promises you and me. Amen.