

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Kin-dom not Kingdom

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The trouble with parables...well, teaching in general...is the challenge of differing frames of reference. I have a particular frame of reference for my life. Or, to use Gadamer's phrase which you've heard from me before, I have a particular "horizon of meaning."¹ How I interact with the world around me, how I interpret the relentless stream of information that I am taking in...that is greatly affected by my lenses, my frames of reference, the lifetime of experiences, habits, and proclivities I have arrived at over the span of my existence. But what happens when I try to share something with someone else who has a vastly different frame of reference? Often... miscommunication and misunderstanding.

I raise this issue because we have a few things going on in our Gospel text for today that I think can trip us up because of differences in our frames of reference. And, after all, the ELCA understands that interpreting scripture requires placing it within its historic, social, and literary contexts. For good interpretations, we must consider what the frames of reference for the original hearers were. It's no great surprise that Jesus leans heavily on agricultural imagery and language in most of his teaching. That would have been a very common frame of reference for his audiences. It's maybe a bit harder for us today though, since agriculture has changed over the last two millennia and no longer has quite the impact on language and culture that it once had.

Who among us...without having heard this parable or a sermon on it before, would know how big a mustard seed is? How many would know that most Hebrew farmers at the time of Christ would have considered mustard to be an annoyingly aggressive weed? One that is quite capable of forcing out other plants from wide swathes of land. Would this language of seeds really have meant much to us today? A modern

¹ According to Gadamer, since it is not possible to totally remove oneself from one's own broader context, (e.g. the background, history, culture, gender, language, education, etc.) to an entirely different system of attitudes, beliefs and ways of thinking, in order to be able to gain an understanding from a conversation or dialogue about different cultures we must acquire "the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition." through negotiation; in order to come to an agreement, the participants must establish a shared context through this "fusion" of their horizons.

parable with modern frames of reference might have us thinking about social media and tweeting; or perhaps dandelions and asphalt.

It's important for us to acknowledge when we are removed from these frames of reference. We can never perfectly capture how someone else will understand something, but we can at least acknowledge that our horizon of meaning, the lenses we use, are not the **only** horizons or the only lenses that exist. If we can do that, we will find ourselves more open to what the Spirit may be saying to us. Here is yet another example of the blessing of diversity. We can come to fuller knowledge of the Way of Christ by hearing how others understand it.

While the agricultural imagery can trip us up in this Gospel text for today, there's another frame of reference going on that I suspect most of us miss completely. This business about birds of the air nesting in the branches of the mustard bush.² It seems straight forward image from nature, but it's actually a reference to common imperial imagery of the time.

Hans Leander, in his book "Discourses of Empire" explains: "This imagery reminds one of how empires were often depicted in antiquity: a large tree in which birds build their nests. Although the Markan Jesus makes use of imperial imagery to describe the kingdom of God, there is also an unmistakable discrepancy. Rather than a large and mighty tree that usually represents an empire, Mark has Jesus use the image of a garden herb or shrub that in full size becomes between two and three meters tall."³

This difference, Leander argues, is an important one, "As represented by the mustard seed, the real threat to imperial discourse did not lie as much in the oppositional contrasting of Jesus and the emperor as it did in the playful, yet profound destabilizing of imperial notions of strength and triumph that were enacted in anticipation of God's unimperial empire."⁴ Rather than a towering oak, reaching to the heavens and dwarfing everything around it; the kingdom of God is more like a smallish shrub, full of nooks and crannies. Instead of a tall, thick, straight trunk from which provinces and kingdoms spring; the kingdom of God is full of spaces and places for people to nest.

What if these frames of reference that Christ is using, are pointing us to a different understanding of what the kingdom of God is like. Illustrating how it is unlike every other kingdom or empire humanity has ever known. Perhaps Jesus is subverting these

² Mark 4:32 (NRSVue)

³ Leander, Hans. *Discourses of Empire: The Gospel of Mark from a Postcolonial Perspective*. Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2013.

⁴ *Ibid.*

lenses, trying to show us a different way to live and be in the world. Jesus may be teaching us here that God is not a king (certainly not in the way we understand that term) and we are not his subjects; but rather God is a caregiver, and we are God's kin, God's own beloved children.

Lenny Duncan is the author I first encountered who suggested using the phrase "God's kin-dom" as opposed to "God's kingdom." I'm not sure he coined the phrase, but it's not a new idea. My ethics professor in seminary, the Rev. Dr. Craig Nesson, taught that it may be more helpful to think of the "culture" of God as opposed to the "kingdom" of God. While Jesus used the language of kingdoms and empires, it was a common frame of reference during his time, he regularly subverted them, and we need to understand those references in order to see how Jesus subtly critiques them. When we delve into those references, we will quickly discover that Jesus largely turns systems of power and control on their heads.

In roughly three months we will hear this verse: "He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'"⁵ The following week we will hear: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."⁶ Both of these verses occur within the context of Jesus teaching about the wealthy and powerful and the kingdom of God. Jesus will make it clear that the world's priorities, the values of empire, are not God's priorities or values.

God is not at all concerned with the normal trappings of kingship and kingdom. Why would God care about exercising power and control over humanity? God is omnipotent and could simply force us to follow the Way of Christ. But that is what empire would do. That is what kings and the wealthy would focus on. God is more concerned with the well-being of humanity. God earnestly desires to gather all people into God's presence, into God's family, into shared "kin-dom."

Seek first the kingdom of God. Seek first the kin-dom of God. Seek first the culture of God. Seek first the Way of Christ. Seek first connection with your Creator and connection with your fellow creatures.

The influence of God, the good news of God's deep and abiding love for the cosmos, **will** spread...like a weed. And like a plant, it will grow without us doing anything more than spreading the seeds around. Connection begets connection. Kinship is built in simple, beautiful ways: In shared meals and celebrations. In shared work and ministry. In mutual aid and support. In comfort and mercy. In justice and compassion.

⁵ Mark 9:35

⁶ Mark 10:31

God's kingdom is the opposite of empire. It is the opposite of power and control. God's kin-dom is calling fisherfolk, tax collectors, and sinners brothers and sisters, members of God's family. God's culture is one of deep and mysterious growth, new life bursting from surprising places. The Way of Christ is one of time spent together, time spent in loving and being loved. Amen.