

Lectionary 17 Year A 2020
July 26, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus spends a lot of his time teaching about the Kingdom of God, much of which is done through parables. We heard one such parable last Sunday as Jesus taught using the parable of the weeds and the wheat. Today we get *five* more short parables that Jesus uses to help proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God.

But these teachings aren't just about some far-off time and place in heaven. These teachings help to bring in a new reality, a new way of living within the world—in every time and place. The Kingdom of God is a way of life. It is a way of viewing the world through a different lens. It is a way of seeing that brings hope, grace, and love.

Martin Luther taught that we live simultaneously in two kingdoms: the kingdom of this world, and the Kingdom of God.

The values of this world are:

- Me first
- I get what I want.
- I do what I want.
- I am better than others.
- I deserve it.
- I am more important.

The values of the Kingdom of God are:

- God loves us as we are.
- God so loved the world, that God sent God's only son FOR US.
- All people* are created by God.
- Care for others is a sign of God's love and grace.
- Care for others is a reaction to God's undeserved grace.

-Our goal is to value one another and create community.

These are two very different kingdoms. At their base, the difference between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God is who is in charge. Us, or God. One kingdom is all about me, while the other kingdom is all about God and others. Is life all about what I want and the stuff I can acquire? Is it all about getting what I want before I die? Or is there more? How is life different if we shift our focus, and see that God reigns in the kingdom?

For one, we begin to see that life is about more than having the latest, greatest, best stuff that money can buy. It's more than keeping up with the Jones'. Living in the Kingdom of God focuses our attention on building relationships across divisions, walking with one another and learning from one another, creating community and standing up for those who are oppressed or rejected or forgotten. To put it simply, the Kingdom of God in this time and place focuses on love of *people* rather than love of possessions or love of self.

But more than that, when we see that God is in control, that Jesus reigns, we are reminded that sin and death do not have the final word. Because God has adopted us as God's children, and made us children of God's kingdom, we can look sin and death in the face and say –there is more. There is *so* much more. Sin and death do not rule our lives. In the Kingdom of God, we have hope beyond death, hope beyond greed, hope beyond COVID-19, hope beyond division, hope beyond racism, and sexism, and all the forces of evil in our world. When God is in control, there is *always* hope.

When we listen again to the parables for this morning about the Kingdom of God, we hear again and again that there is hope.

-The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grew into the greatest of shrubs.

-The Kingdom of God is like yeast that leavens all of the dough.

-The Kingdom of God is like a hidden treasure.

-The Kingdom of God is like finding great pearls.

-The Kingdom of God is like a miraculously diverse haul of fish.

The Kingdom of God is like looking for hopefulness in the midst of a hopeless situation. The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that, “(in the Kingdom of God,) God works all things for good for those who love God. Now, to be clear, this doesn’t mean that everything that happens is good. It means that in God’s Kingdom, even tragedies have the potential for good to come from them. And for an example, we need to look no further than the Apostle Paul himself. He was a walking tragedy before he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus. He spent his life persecuting, arresting and killing Christians. And yet he was transformed into a follower of Christ, an apostle, a preacher, a church planter, and a writer of some of our most sacred letters in the New Testament. He is known now as one of the heroes of our faith. And if God can bring such an amazing transformation from the Apostle Paul’s former life, then there is hope for transformation and good in all kinds of situations. We can even see this hope and transformation today:

God brings hope in the midst of hopelessness:

-in the flooding in Mid-Michigan. Even though the floods had such a terrible effect, there has been an outpouring of neighbors helping neighbors.

-In the midst of this pandemic, God brought a light of hope to our sky in the form of the comet Neowise that only appears every 7,000 years.

-In the midst of dust traveling around the world from the Saharan Desert, God transforms dust clouds into beautiful sunsets, and provides nutrients for downwind ecosystems.

-And even Martin Luther set his mind on hope when he said that even if he knew the world was coming to an end tomorrow, he would still plant an apple tree today.

Hope is the way of life within the Kingdom of God. God has the power to create beauty from chaos, turn bad into good, bring rebirth from disaster, and raise life out of death.

Imagine yet another parable: The Kingdom of God is like facing hopelessness and death and knowing that Jesus still reigns. This is the kingdom in which we live right now. We know plenty well that COVID-19 can be deadly. Over 160,000 people have died in the United States in just 7 months. Worldwide, it's 600,000. Most of us know someone who has tested positive, perhaps someone who struggled for their life, and many of us know someone who died from this disease.

And we do our best to stay safe—we keep physical distance, we stay home, wear a mask, and wash our hands. We know this virus can be deadly, and we listen to the science, taking precautions that mitigate the risks. But we keep on living—because we have to. So we cautiously carry on, and face the risk of death as we go about our daily interactions. But living in the Kingdom of God means that Jesus is with us. And so as we continue on with life, we do so faithfully, continuing to be generous in our relationships with one another and with our community.

- Financial support to churches is down—including our congregation, but not by the potential 50% that some had predicted. Because even in the midst of our buildings being closed, our ministry has continued. We continued to reach out to one another, and we continued to support our neighbors.

- Many individuals and organizations have stepped up to support King's Kupboard through additional funds and also through volunteers. Special donations have come in, grants have been awarded, and we continue to serve our community.

- Throughout our synod, gifts and money have been donated to assist the flood victims in mid-Michigan.

-And doctors, nurses, healthcare workers, and cleaning crews, are all working overtime to provide vital health services to the most vulnerable in our community.

The Kingdom of God is like facing hopelessness and death and knowing that Jesus still reigns. God gives us hope in the midst of hopelessness, and God empowers us to bring hope to the troubled times and places of our world. This is what it means to live in the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God will one day be *fully* realized, and will be fully here. But the Kingdom of God is also a way of life right now and a way of seeing the world right now. Wherever Jesus went throughout his ministry, he brought the Kingdom of God with him:

- In his care for others, especially the outcast, the sick, and the oppressed.
- By healing, forgiving, and giving hope.
- By not worrying about gaining earthly power.
- Though facing death with hope and grace.

Jesus brought us an Easter life –an Easter kingdom—a kingdom in which we trust that life goes on, hope goes on, and grace goes on.

This is not just some dream for a far-off time and place in heaven. Jesus lived this hope and grace every day. Even on the cross he shared forgiveness and grace, and he embodied it even more fully on Easter morning.

So, even though we live in a world that seems dark and dreary right now, there are signs of the Kingdom of God among us. Look for places where you see Jesus in others doing the work of the Kingdom. And in your prayers, reflect on how you see the Kingdom of God here in our midst, even in times of despair and death. Because God promises to show up. And God brings us hope when we need it most. Thanks be to God. Amen.

*This sermon is based on Rev. David Sprang's sermon for July 26, 2020.