

## **Fourth Sunday after Pentecost June 16 2024**

### **Ezekiel 17:22-24 ; Mark 4:26-34**

The Kingdom of God- let's speak of the reign of God, which is probably the better term for it. When we think of kingdom, we tend to think geography- The Magical Kingdom in Bay Lake, Florida for example. Instead, the Kingdom of God Jesus is talking about is where God's power and authority extend. The reign of God is that power of God made visible in a sense.

So, these parables are what Jesus says the reign of God is like.

To get a sense of what is happening in the second parable of the mustard seed you need to attend to our first reading. The main symbol there is the Cedar tree. Now in the Hebrew scriptures the Cedars of Lebanon are often used to describe power, strength, rule. It is something used to describe what Israel is to become through God's favor as a light to the nations. The rule of God is like a mighty Cedar of Lebanon. Think the Redwoods of the Northwest. These are trees that spread their mighty branches to shade and protect. So that, "Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." (Ezekiel 17: 23), sound familiar to anything in our Gospel?

Jesus uses that same language, but it isn't for a cedar tree. What plant does Jesus use?

The mustard seed. Well, that is about as far from the majestic cedars of Lebanon as you can get. It's a common weed in Israel. It would be like contrasting those Redwoods from the Northwest with dandelions. The reign of God is like dandelions...

Jesus says the reign of God is like... based on the first parable, the word used is not even seed. It's spore. And the person casts it off. Throws it away. The implication is that the person doesn't see any value in it and just throws it aside and forgets about it. But the next thing you know- it has grown and yielded fruit!

I was in Cresco this week for Henry Elwood's committal and was talking with one of the Legion members and he told me about his kids planting some apple trees in their yard. But he didn't need that. Down the road was a house and where they used to throw their stuff to decompose, out of that had grown an apple tree. And the guy who owned the land now didn't mind him coming by to grab some fruit every now and again. The reign of God looks like an apple tree that sprang from what folks discarded as useless.

What does the reign of God look like?

I wonder if we don't look for the cedar trees, and miss the reality of the dandelion of the reign of God? Where is the reign of God? We might point to this wonderful building. Or the Catholic Charities. Vatican City. The Southern Baptist Convention. Zondervan Publishing. The latest Christian movie.

But what if the reign of God looks more like the ordinary and every day? The dandelions of the world.

What if I told you, the reign of God shows up when we feed our children. It shows up when we do our best work at our jobs because it provides us and our families daily bread but also because our neighbor needs – good roads, safe internet, a clear diagnosis, their groceries bagged to more easily get them home. The reign

of God is present (now back to John) when we love God with all that we are and love our neighbor as ourselves.

It arrives in the little, throw away things that we do with and for one another. And we never know when it will take root and bloom. How that kind word spoken to someone, the encouragement given to a young child, the bottle of water extended to someone who looks thirsty, might transform that person's life. Forever. Make them believe that they are beloved, that they are valuable, that they have worth. An apple tree, sprung up from what was just tossed aside.

According to the first parable, as one author put it, the reign of God is "something you sow inadvertently, and it grows while you are busy going about your business."

According to these parables, the reign of God is non-systematic. It doesn't need a program, or strategy. It just needs the people of God living out their lives of faith in the world. Fulfilling that Affirmation of Baptism promise to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ in word and deed. Every word and deed.

One of the greatest gifts my father gave me was helping me to see that truth. And how freeing it was. Even as a pastor, all I am called to do in my life, is proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ in word and deed and let the Spirit take care of the rest. To spread the spores of the Word ever where I go. Trailing them like the soft cottonwood that has drifted across our landscape these last months.

I can do that. You can do that.

Every day. Everywhere.

The reign of God is what happens when you drive your commute, when you cut the grass and wash the dishes. It is planted as you speak with co-workers, buy your groceries, deal with that difficult customer.

The reign of God is what happens as you walk through school, interact with your classmates, talk to your teachers, play softball, ride your bikes around the neighborhood, interact on social media.

The reign of God happens as you teach your children how to tie their shoes, look both ways when they cross the street, bathe them and read them a bedtime story.

The reign of God is in the ordinary. But when that ordinary is based on love of God with all that we are and love of neighbor, then it transforms. It bears fruit. A harvest that arises and surprises.

I wonder if we like the cedar tree image because it is something that stays put. Stays in its lane. The reign of God is over there, at church, in the building, which means over here is me and my space.

But, like any weed, the reign of God doesn't stay in its space. It moves into all aspects of human existence. Like dandelions it springs up in how we vote as we consider the needs of our neighbors at least as much as our own needs. It blooms when we speak well of others and look at what they do in the best possible light. The reign of God doesn't stay in its lane because it encompasses all of human life. Even if we don't think so.

You, each of you, has been claimed by God in the waters of baptism. Called a beloved child. Gifted by the Holy Spirit with unique gifts and talents. And called

into a variety of vocations. As child, spouse, parent, friend, coworker, neighbor, citizen. And it is in and through each of these callings that the reign of God comes into this world just as we pray it might each week.

It is God who makes the kingdom grow, not us. Our only call is to be faithful. Faithful in casting the Word. Faithful in bathing in that Word ourselves. In assembling to practice those skills that will inhabit our daily lives as citizens of God's reign. Skills of confession, forgiveness, grace, mercy, love. Skills of welcome and service. The skills of curiosity and looking at what others do in the best possible way.

The reign of God comes not in some neat package or plan. With six steps or praying a particular prayer. It comes in fits and starts. It might look like it is gone at times, but just like dandelions in a parking lot, the reign of God finds a way to survive.

And what a promise of hope all of this is.

The reign of God looks like the lot across the way over the past few years. A field of dandelions that you just can't get rid of. It shows up in the ordinary that suddenly becomes extraordinary.

It shows up through us and our particular gifts and skills. It shows up even when we don't particularly understand why or how. When we might look back and say, "I was just being polite, kind. I always say thank you and look them in the eye."

But it is in these little "throw away" things that God works. Getting inside someone who doesn't think they have any worth at all. Who thinks their job isn't

valued. And blooms to make them feel more of what each of us is- a beloved child of God, created in God's very image.

This is the reign of God we pray would come each week. Martin Luther in his explanation of this petition says we know it will come without our praying for it. God has promised that it will. What we are praying is that it would come, even in some small way, in and through us. How we live in this world.

I invite us each to go out this week and pay attention to those places that you don't normally attend to. And wonder. Did I just plant a dandelion? Did I just expand the reign of God?

And see how wide and broad your understanding of God's reign can be.