

Sermon for Proper 6 Year B

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(RCL) 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13, Psalm 20, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17, Mark 4:26-34

In today's gospel passage, Jesus speaks in parables. Again. He does that a lot. Jesus frequently uses this particular literary device to get his point across. And in this passage from Mark's gospel, we hear that Jesus preached only in parables, "as they were able to hear."

Parables are brief stories that illustrate a particular religious or moral construct, short tales that communicate universal truths. They are not like fables or legends, in that they are true. But they are also not like nonfiction narratives, in that they are not always strictly factual. Parables are a kind of extended metaphor, which is one way – and maybe the best way – of grasping the amazing wonder that is God within the limits of human language.

And today's parable is about exactly that: the amazing wonder that is God. Jesus refers to it as the "kingdom of God," whereas some in our day prefer less monarchical or male imagery. Some suggest that we should call this the "realm" or the "commonwealth" of God – and the Greek of the original text supports this interpretation.

From an etymological viewpoint, the term derives from the word for "base" or "foundation." It refers not to territory, as in the Kingdom of Siam, but to dominion, as in a semi-autonomous state that is under the sovereignty of another entity. In a way, our own Anglican Communion is an example of such a kingdom, as each of nearly forty churches – including our own Episcopal Church – is semi-autonomous. Yet each is also part of the Anglican family, and all of us under the sovereignty of God in Christ.

The kind of kingdom Jesus describes is just like that: it is a kingdom in which the members have choice, the free will to make decisions about their lives, their involvement, their direction, and their future.

And the first choice we get to make is about which kingdom to call our own. You see, when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, he is talking about a kingdom inhabited by the righteous, and this kingdom is not the only kingdom.

Jesus thinks the most obvious other kingdom – Satan's kingdom – is not worth a fig, but he does acknowledge that it exists. In Luke's gospel, for instance, he asks, "If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?" The kingdom of evil is real; it's all around us all the time, and we are lured by it and sometimes swayed by it.

The hope, of course, is that God will draw all persons to himself, and that everyone will enter the kingdom of heaven. That is Jesus' prayer, and that must be our fervent and unwavering prayer as Christian people: that everyone will choose the path of righteousness.

But the persistent reality of this incarnate world is that some people make other choices. The examples are legion. In our age, we can think of Timothy McVeigh, who chose to bomb a building in

Okalahoma City rather than serve the poor in the name of Jesus. Or Adolph Hitler, who sought to exterminate a people and dominate the world rather than serve as the least of these who are members of Christ's family.

There are many, many others, of course. And these are the extreme cases. Most of the world will not plot terrorist attacks, commit murder, or seek global domination. But we nevertheless have choices to make. We can choose the path of righteousness, or that other path. And we make that choice in big ways and in little ones, over and over and over again throughout our lives. Mostly, thanks be to God, we choose the path of righteousness, we choose to enter into the kingdom of God.

But sometimes, we make a different choice. We all do this, each and every one of us. From time to time, we all make the wrong choice. It is called sin.

We make a choice that puts our own selfish wishes over the real needs of the community that surrounds us. We make a choice that wreaks violence on someone else – be it physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. We make a choice that belittles other people according to category – be it race, or gender, or disability, or you name it.

In the kingdom of God, we would put aside our own egotistical need to have power over anyone else, and instead cultivate compassion, understanding, and cooperation.

In the kingdom of God, we would cease all violence, repenting of the evil that enslaves us, and instead promote true dialogue, empathy, and acceptance.

In the kingdom of God, we will bring an end to our own oppression of others, and instead foster open-mindedness, willingness to encounter what is new, and appreciation for difference.

This is a hopeful vision of paradise, and Jesus offers this to us every day – in his parables, in the sacraments, and in the spirit embodied in everyone we meet.

It seems so very clear. Kingdom of God: good. Kingdom of Satan: bad. Choose the good and reject the bad. So why is it that so often we do not make the right choice?

One reason – perhaps the biggest reason – is fear.

When we are afraid of something, we sometimes choose what is safe over what may seem challenging. When we are afraid of what we know about some people, we sometimes choose to disparage them rather than take the opportunity to make new acquaintances.

When we are afraid of what we do not know, we sometimes choose to avoid the growth that comes only through learning something new, retreating instead into a cocoon of ignorance.

But according to Mark's gospel, in the kingdom of God it is "as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how."

We do not know how the miracle that is God's love works, how it grows, or what makes it sprout. And so we might respond in fear of the unknown, avoiding confrontation with our shadow side, acquiescing to our darker thoughts, choosing what is safe over what is right.

Or we can respond in hopeful confidence, trusting that God is doing more than we can ask or imagine – even when we cannot see, or refuse to see, or do not comprehend.

A few years ago, an article in the New York Times quoted Harvard professor Kimberly M. Thompson as saying that the problem is that “we’re not taught how to cope with uncertainty. We tend to want answers to be in black and white without a whole lot of gray.”

Her research tells us that most of us respond to risk and fear through some sort of gut instinct, rather than any sort of analytical calculations.

But so often what we take as “gut instinct” is not the leading of God. We are called to study, to pray, and to consider how best to make the choice to live in the kingdom of God.

We’ve all heard the excuses: Sure, it’s wrong to lie, but I was under such pressure! It was a sin to treat her the way I did, but I was so very angry! I know I’m married, but this other person made me feel so good!

That list goes on and on, as well. Those examples – and every example – show us what temptation and sin are all about: refusing to stop and consider how best to make the choice for the kingdom of God. And that is what we Christians are called to do: to consider the consequences of our actions, to turn away from evil, to choose to live in the kingdom of God.

As it says in Mark 4: “For the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.”

What seems like a trivial matter, then, can become the pattern of a lifetime.

The smallest of seeds becomes the greatest of all shrubs. The tiniest of babes can become the greatest of all saints.

And even the nastiest of all Christians can become the greatest of all examples of what it is to choose to live in the kingdom of God.

Because that choice comes not once in a lifetime, not ever so rarely, not only now and again. The choice to live in the kingdom of God comes to each of us every hour of every day. So let us walk by faith, not by sight, with confidence. For the love of Christ urges us on. Everything old has passed away, and in Christ there is a new creation.

That new creation is us. And it is up to us to make the choice for the kingdom of God.

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