

**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Michael Bird Sermon Transcript**

“The Kingdom of God: A Liberating, Daring Possibility”

In both of Matthew’s seed parables, we hear of the Kingdom of God as a messy, unruly, and inclusive harbor of human initiative, daringly designed to stand in opposition to Caesar’s kingdom. “The Kingdom of God is of God, and yet we do have a role in it; we just don’t control it,” preaches Father Bird. “I feel set free because this Kingdom of God is not dependent on me, but on the one who came for me and died for me and lives with me everyday. How free do you feel?” The readings are 1 Samuel 15: 34-16: 13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10; and Mark 4: 26-34.

Sermon Transcript:

This is not part of the sermon, but I need to exorcise this image out of my head before I start the sermon or the sermon will veer wildly in a direction I do not intend. As the first reading was being read and we have this image of Samuel and Jesse and the family, I could not get out of my head what it was like to be a child on the streets of Philadelphia as we were choosing kickball teams as you stood there and you got passed over for that person with a stronger leg or a quicker move to first base. There is that discomfort in that reading, that discomfort that Samuel certainly owned, a discomfort deeply baked into the idea of human initiative and God's grace and how they fit together. Now, that's out. When I was growing up in Philadelphia, there was a certain level of television programming that had my complete and undivided attention. Anything about nature was my jam. If Jacques Cousteau had a special on, I was going to be there. I'm going to date myself with this reference, but every single Saturday night when Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom came on, I was glued to the TV and then there were these moments and they seem to me to have always been on public television of time lapse photography as it relates to nature.

I just remember marveling as a child at these little movies that saw the Earth and then suddenly from the Earth came this shoot, and then these stems, and these leaves, and these flowers right before my very eyes. I watched every single one that was available to see and I can promise you at no time in any of that programming was a reference made to the grace of God and human initiative, but it's there, it's right there in front of our very eyes. It is there for the taking in of our ears. It is so incredibly present that Jesus could not go anywhere else, at least in the Gospel of Mark and the two parables on the Kingdom of God, than to give us this sense of God at work in ways we cannot see, but yet we can see. That's the nature of the conflict of a parable when you throw these things together; God at work, but somehow we silly people being involved in it or surrounded by it. The truth is that when Jesus chose to use the phrase, Kingdom of God, it was already making a big statement.

The only kingdom present at that time and in that place was the kingdom of Caesar. To equate the Kingdom of God to something other than that was a daring and irrevocable statement of faith and possibility and contrast to the popular culture. This setting up of Caesar versus God and also this bringing in of human initiative. The very first parable, the Kingdom of God is— it's good thing I wasn't the

deacon for today and had to read that out loud, wait, I was. The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground. Do you hear that invitation to us? That person is not named, that person is not designated as Jesus, that image is not of God, it is a human being invited to take initiative to scatter seed on the ground and then do that thing that humans do having scattered seed, you have to take a nap. You got to rest night and day and that seed somehow doesn't need us to micromanage it. Having scattered the seed and taken our rest and stepped back and made room for God to do what God does, this seed sprouts and grows. The Earth produces of itself and then we are called back in to bring in the harvest, to participate in its usefulness, and to share the gracious bounty. The Kingdom of God is of God and yet we do have a role in it, we just don't control it.

The second parable, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. I could preach 17 sermons on the size of a mustard seed and the side of the bush that grows out of it and all that stuff, but the thing I want to at least note for today is a mustard bush is a mess. The Kingdom of God is a mess. It is a messy, unruly thing that is a surprise to everyone. The Kingdom of God cannot be prescribed because it's God's Kingdom to which we are invited. The Kingdom of God is not, as we would find if we look deeply for all the seed analogies in the Bible. It's not as we would find in Ezekiel Chapter 17. What I would think it would be if I were telling this parable, a noble cedar tree that is strong and tall and powerful and of all our earthly definitions of the way things should be and the way some people should be in charge. The Kingdom of God is not that. It is like a mustard seed that sprouts and grows and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, puts forth large branches so that the birds can make nests, so that we can hang all our hopes and dreams on it.

When the early followers of Jesus heard this, perhaps they heard that this movement, which could not match up to Caesar's kingdom, and in fact was deliberately designed to stand in opposition to Caesar's kingdom, that this movement was going to be something other. This movement was going to be messy. It was going to start from the humblest of places. It was going to start from like the armpit of the armpit of the Roman Empire and yet in very few centuries, its message of love and possibility and inclusion, its deep commitment to the dignity of all persons, its expansive understanding of God's divine intention for all of creation would become so momentous, generate such strength and possibility that it could not be denied, and because it's a mustard bush, when it loses its way, because it is a mess and seeks to reclaim those same definitions of love and inclusion and care for the poor and voice against oppression, there is still room for it to be the Kingdom of God, because it is about the grace of God and not about us. I love that. I find it incredibly freeing and deeply inspiring to be able to risk making a mistake in the name of Jesus because God's got this. I find it liberating to dare to pursue justice instead of just doing some definition of the right thing. I feel set free because this Kingdom of God is not dependent on me, but on the one who came for me and died for me, and lives with me every day. How free do you feel, and in embracing that freedom, what initiative in the midst of God's grace are you willing to do today, and tomorrow, and the next day?

Amen.