

Sermon notes July 26, 2020
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Redeemer, Ramsey

Grace, Mercy and Peace, from God and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Welcome to you all.

Thank you for your
commitment to our family of faith,
support of our ministry
upkeep of our staff
for your prayers
We are grateful to serve in this capacity

This time of pandemic has been very difficult.

- our plans and expectations, hopes and dreams deferred, delayed, or even cancelled
 - Some have lost work, spent down savings, incurred new bills
 - our stress levels are very high
 - caring for loved ones and educating our children are incredibly difficult
- now

We have been psychologically stretched and stressed by the demand for social distance, and the cancellation of our in-person activities. We long for more human contact than we are allowed. We hope for that day when we can set these precautions aside, and return to normal. We see the state of the pandemic in the society around us, and we pray even harder for a successful vaccine, and soon.

Redeemer's life has been stretched too, but Redeemer has handled these constraints very well. We have weathered the storm, and our ship is not leaking too badly. As a congregation, we have suffered and grieved with one another, we have lost momentum in our initiatives and plans, some folks have lost faith, but no more than anyone else. We have maintained a high level of financial support, thanks to you. We have maintained a high level of ministry and care, even if mostly online or through the phone.

But for the time being our ministries of presence, including in-person worship, Sunday School and Confirmation classes, visitation, meetings, hosting groups, working and volunteering together for various causes, all have been reduced to our online presence, and other electronic and digital ways of communicating. This has been hard to accept, this change demanded by our circumstances.

Most of all, we are grateful for the grace of God, the love of Christ, and the presence of the Holy spirit, which have kept us in the communion of saints, and have cared for us in all our needs, even when we can't keep things from falling apart.

Through all of these challenges, we know we are to keep our eyes peeled for the kingdom of God. We are taught by Jesus that the kingdom is "coming soon, and is already here." And so we learn that we are to seek the Kingdom of God in faith. And we hope for it, glimpse and taste it, and pray that it come sooner rather than later. The pandemic has not clouded our view of the kingdom, or made it irrelevant. In truth, the pandemic has heightened our awareness, and our longing for it.

So I want to encourage you to view these aspects of our congregation's life-- worship, Sunday School and Confirmation classes, visitation, meetings, hosting groups, working and volunteering together for various causes,--vies them like the branches of the kingdom in our midst. They are the branches of the kingdom growing and reaching out into the world.

Jesus uses the famous parable of the mustard seed to teach about the kingdom. The kingdom, the size of a mustard seed, grows into something big, a bush, so big that it provides shade and protection to the birds of the air.

When our ministries of care, hospitality, education, service and worship are functioning, they are like the branches of the mustard plant, this bush that grows from such a small seed. Jesus says that this great bush, this kingdom plant, a kingdom tree, which grows from such a small, insignificant, meek and humble seed, grows into a great bush, and when it does, the branches and there leaves offer shade, and protection for other creatures.

The parable is about the surprising growth of the kingdom from such humble origins. In its context in the Gospel of Matthew, it is paired with the parable of the leaven in the loaf. It is meant to convey a counter intuitive view of how God works in the world. God doesn't act in ways that we humans would normally say is almighty, or grand, or spectacular. No, God works mysteriously in and through that which is most humble, meek, small, seemingly insignificant. God does this to undermine our conventional expectations, and to catch us by surprise, so that we, being suddenly surprised by the kingdom's presence, might be disarmed, mentally and spiritually shocked, so that we end up humbly repenting of our expectations of grandeur and glory, and accepting the strong and relentless power of God's meek and gentle presence.

The second part of the parable is what I take to be an add-on, a lesson that helps us further in our theological thinking.

The birds of the air are those people that find a shelter, a support, a refuge or sanctuary, in the shade and protection of our ministries. The birds of the air in this sense are the little ones that Jesus reminds us to look out for....

The birds of the air are those in our midst who are hurting, grieving, scared.

Hence our ministries of care, our quilters, our funeral repast, our knitters, our card mailers

The birds of the air are those in the world around us whom we support through our gifts.

Hence our intentional relationships with St. Stephan's grace, our mission partner in Newark, who struggle financially to serve a much poorer and vulnerable demographic that is in our immediate community. Also here we count our intentional relationship with Pastor Janelle Neubauer and the Young Adults in Global Mission program in Rwanda. We count here also our support for the larger church, the New Jersey synod, the ELCA, and other mission partner agencies that we support.

The birds of the air are those who stand in a humbler, less protected, more vulnerable relation to those who wield worldly power. Here I count our prayers for those in our society and our world who put themselves out there in advocacy, in activism, in protest, standing up for the rights and care of members of our society that have been historically neglected.

This last question for me is important.

Where are the birds of the air in your kingdom bush. How are you using your slice of the kingdom to shield, protect, encourage, or support those who are more vulnerable. This has been the driving question for me in my recent support for our local Ramsey Alliance for Social Equity. They have been our local “Black Lives Matter” protest group in Ramsey since the death of George Floyd. They are small, humble, but deeply passionate about the idea that our society has to get serious about making changes to combat systemic racism in our country. They stand on the street and hold up their signs, and the majority of people around them drive by, walk by, saying nothing. Those who are willing to show support honk their car horns. Those who are against their efforts at racial justice drive by and make vulgar signs out the window, or even curse at them.

If our kingdom bush is to stand the test of time in this place, we have to tend to its health, we have to ask God to help us care for it. We have to ask for God’s grace and mercy to be able to work together to promote its ministries.

And we also have to ask ourselves the question that Jesus will ask us all at the end, in that final day when the true reckoning happens. Jesus will ask us about the little ones, the birds of the air, who have found a shelter in our kingdom bush. Jesus will ask us, who did you shelter, who did you stand up for, who did you support, who was among the least of these?

May we be found faithful in our ministry of care, hospitality, education, worship, and advocacy, that the judge and merciful savior of us all would look upon our failures and weakness, and forgive them with his grace.