

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
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Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, maybe like me, when you had English back in school...

Maybe like me, you weren't big into all the different figures of speech.

We remember the figures of speech, don't we?

There was, for instance, personification, which is when a nonhuman object is given human characteristics.

Like the phrase, "The flowers *danced* in the wind."

And then there was the figure of speech known as onomatopoeia, which is when a word evokes the sound of the thing they refer to or describe.

Like the "boom" of a firework, or the "buzz" of a bee, or the "tick tock" of a clock.

Yes, we learned all sorts of figures of speech back in school, didn't we?

We learned about alliteration, when a series of words all begin with the same sound.

We learned about hyperbole, which is an exaggeration taken to the extreme.

We learned about irony, the use of words to convey the opposite of their meaning.

And...and we learned about similes.

We learned that we can compare two dissimilar things by using the word "like" or "as."

"You look as white as a ghost." "You swim like a fish." "I ate like a pig."

These are all similes, where a comparison is made of two unlike things.

And I bring this up, because of all things, our Lord Jesus Christ really liked to make use of similes.

Only they weren't called similes in Jesus' day.

No, they were called parables.

Indeed, our gospel reading today says, "With many such parables, Jesus spoke the word to the disciples, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them except in parables."

Why did Jesus like to use parables so much?

I have no idea, except to say that sometimes the best way to capture the idea of something, especially something difficult to comprehend...

Sometimes the best way to capture the idea of something is by use of a simile.

In order to capture the sheer surprise of a person, we might say, "You look as white as a ghost."

In order to capture the athletic ability of an individual in the water, we might say, "You swim like a fish."

And in order to capture just how famished we were, we might say, "I ate like a pig."

And Jesus, in order to capture the idea of the kingdom of God, used similes, or parables.

No, simple thing to try to explain, right?

What is the kingdom of God after all?

I mean we could say the kingdom of God is clouds, and angels with harps.

We could say the kingdom of God is an old man with a white beard, sitting on a throne.

We could describe an IMAGE of the kingdom of God, but that really doesn't get at what the kingdom of God really is.

And so, if we were to dig underneath, or look behind the surface IMAGE of the kingdom of God, what would we find?

It is like trying to explain what a human being is?

Sure, we can talk about a creature with a head and with arms and legs and a torso, but that is not what makes a human being a human being.

Monkeys and apes have a similar configuration.

We could talk about a human being as an intelligent creature who is self-aware, who is able to dream and to imagine.

But what do words like intelligent, self-aware, dream, and imagine, really mean?

It is difficult to explain exactly what a human being is, just like it is difficult to explain what the kingdom of God is.

PAUSE

Now, I recognize that this sermon is getting extremely philosophical.

But there is a point to all this, and that is, when it comes down to it, the kingdom of God and most everything we experience around us, is utterly and completely mysterious.

In our gospel reading Jesus brings this point home when he says, “The kingdom of heaven 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.”

Sure, we can plant seed in the ground. Sure we can water the ground. And the seed will grow.

But what Jesus is saying is “how does the seed know how to do that?” It is a mystery.

Sure, we can talk about the process of germination, and we can talk about the DNA inside the seed, serving as the blueprint for that plant.

We can talk about all these things, but what we are really doing is simply labeling the processes.

But we, as human beings can't engineer the growth itself.

We can play with the genes and tinker with the plants, which is called genetically modifying the plants, but we can't just take basic elements and work our chemistry magic and make growth.

We can't take basic elements for instance and create life.

But that is the mystery, that God through creation made plants and animals from basic elements, and now these same plants and animals do what they do in perpetuating their species.

This is what Jesus says is the mystery, "We put seeds in the ground, we sleep night and day, and the seeds sprout and grow, and we do not how."

"How do the seeds know how to do that?" It is a mystery.

Or, consider the mustard seed. It, too, is planted and it grows and becomes a great shrub, such that it puts forth large branches, and birds make their nests in the shade.

How does all of creation, the shrubs putting forth leaves, the birds building nests...

How does all of creation know what it is supposed to do?

How do molecules of DNA—four different nucleotides arranged in a certain way for different organisms...

How do molecules of DNA that in themselves are not living, but is just chemistry...

How do molecules of DNA inside cells know how to do the specific things they do in different organisms?

This is the question Jesus is asking in this Gospel reading.

But underlying it all is the question about what is the kingdom of God?

It is mysterious. The best that Jesus can do to capture the idea of kingdom of God is to resort to parables.

The kingdom of God is like seeds planted on the ground which grow and then are harvested.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that is planted and grows into a great shrub wherein birds make their nests.

The kingdom of God is like a great, big wondrous mystery.

But the kingdom of God is not all mystery, because Jesus tells us something about the kingdom of God as it relates to seeds that are sown and which are then harvested, and as it relates to a mustard seed that becomes shrub wherein birds make their nests.

Jesus tells us something about the kingdom of God beyond simply that it is mysterious.

And what Jesus tells us is that the kingdom of God is all around us.

It is growing. It is emerging. Like a harvest. It is becoming manifest. It is being made visible all around us. Like shrubs that put forth leaves, and birds that build nests.

PAUSE

And yet, we know it is difficult to appreciate that, that the kingdom of God is all around us even right now.

It is difficult to appreciate that truth, when so much of what we see in the world seems something other than the kingdom of God.

The war in the Ukraine. The war in Gaza.

The mass extinction of species due to habitat loss and pollution.

Global poverty. Human rights violations. Water contamination.

And the list goes on and on, with respect to that which looks to be other than the kingdom of God.

So, why, pray tell, why would Jesus say that the kingdom of God is all around us.

Because that is exactly how Jesus WOULD have us view the world.

You see, the problem is not that there are wars in the world, and famine, and extinction.

That is not the problem.

The problem is HOW WE look at the world, HOW WE approach the world.

And it comes down to several ways we see and approach the world.

- 1) We see the world as being redeemed by a God who will come at the last moment like some superhero and who will save us and all creation. I think many of us buy into this perspective, which is probably why so many people love the Marvel movies, where superheroes rise up and save humanity and the world. We see our world as lost, except that it will be rescued by Jesus the superhero.
- 2) A second way we see the world is as irredeemable. That humans have trashed with world, and so we will live out our existence as best we can for as long as we can. Or, short of that, we see this world as irredeemable and so we see ourselves as leaving this planet for another world.
- 3) But the third way we see this world is as the very kingdom of God locked inside God's people, which means that we, as creatures of God's making, as people of God, we have a part, and not just a small part, but a huge part to play in this world's well-being.

Martin Luther said it best when he described the Kingdom of God in his explanation of the petition in the Lord's Prayer that says, "Thy kingdom come."

"God's kingdom comes whether we pray for it or not," he says.

But, Luther goes on, we pray, "Thy kingdom come," such that God's kingdom might also come to be in us, that we then might be part of the effort to make manifest the kingdom.

Walt Whitman, in his poem "Oh me! Oh life!" expressed a similar truth.

Whitman describes in his poem our struggle to understand what our role is in this mysterious thing called life.

With all of life's plodding along...With all of life's years unfurling... with us intertwined in all the workings of life...

What is our role? What is our purpose?

It seems to be all but a great mystery.

Except like Martin Luther, Walt Whitman also says,

What good amid these, O me, O life?

Except that you and I are here—that life exists and identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you and I may contribute a verse.

That the powerful play goes on, and you and I may contribute a verse.

A verse for the well-being of the kingdom of God all around us.

A verse for the building up of this world, and not for its tearing down.

A verse which encapsulates the parable, “The kingdom of God is like each person fulfilling their call to be a worker in the kingdom.”

And that, Friends, may be the most mysterious thing of all.

That as we, all of God’s people work to help usher in the kingdom of God, we will find that the kingdom is ironically already here—not because God has come from the outside, but because we have let God emerge from within our hearts.

We have a role to play, we have a verse to contribute.

And by God’s grace, God’s kingdom is emerging from our very hearts, and so it all around us.

Yes, the kingdom of God is mysterious, but it is mysterious only because it is hidden in us, until the kingdom of God comes to be revealed through us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.