

Year B Proper 11 2024 Seeing With God's Eyes Mark 4 vv26 to 34

Albert Einstein. I probably don't even need to tell you this but Albert Einstein was a world-renowned physicist, best known for developing the theory of relativity. He was a genius, easily recognized with his famous bushy hair and thick moustache. One day, on his way to teach at Princeton University, Albert was exiting his hotel as a wealthy lady was getting out of her limo out front. She spotted Albert with his crazy hair and slightly rumpled suit and handed him her luggage. She had mistakenly presumed that Albert Einstein was the hotel bellboy. Albert shrugged, carried her luggage inside, and when this lady handed him a tip, he pocketed the money and went on his way to his teaching gig at the university. Looks can be deceiving.

Albert Einstein, world famous scientist, undisputed genius, had been thought to be a bellboy because of his outward appearance. All of the readings today – from the prophet Samuel choosing the next king to Jesus telling us about the kingdom – they all caution us about making judgements based on what we see because God does not see things the way we do.

As Jesse's oldest son stood before Samuel, tall and strong, and the heir of his father's wealth, Samuel thought for sure he was looking at the man God would appoint as king. But Samuel was wrong. God said, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam.16:7). Seven of Jesse's sons paraded past Samuel but none was chosen as king. "Is this all the boys you got?" Samuel asked and Jesse admitted there was one more...just the youngest, the shepherd boy.

The youngest, the shortest, the least of Jesse's boys...stood before Samuel looking nothing like a king. But God knew the inside of this youngster and sure enough, David – with all his faults – became the greatest king of Israel.

This is the king? Samuel must've thought in confusion as young David stood before him. This is their king? Pilate must've thought as Jesus stood before him – beaten and bloody, a regular looking man of no great earthly status. Looks can be deceiving.

Paul was having this same trouble with the Corinthian church. He'd gotten word that, once he'd left town, some of the people had started bad-mouthing him based on human judgements. He's old, they were saying. He's scarred and disfigured, they pointed out. In those days, if you were physically marked up because of beatings you had endured, that was a sign of shame and disgrace. He's got something wrong with his eyes, they said, and he doesn't speak in public very well. On and on they went...insulting him and, therefore, dismissing his message of the good news of the arriving of God's kingdom through Christ.

In his letters, Paul has been pushing back against their short-sighted denigration of his outward appearance. "When will you get it?" he asks them. When will you realize that the human way of understanding power and success is not God's way? Never has been. Never will be. Throw your human understandings out the window and forget about them. The human view of power and success – based on position, property, and pocketbook – means absolutely nothing in God's kingdom. Paul sums up his argument with a fantastic phrase that I want you to keep close in heart and mind as we move forward together as the witness to, and the sign and instrument of God's kingdom in this little neck of the woods. Paul writes, "So if

anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor.5:17)

As I pointed out to the Advisory Board this past Tuesday, Paul does something really interesting and really important: If any**one** is in Christ, every**thing** has become new. When you have Christ within you, the whole world around you is different, it is new...Not because it has changed, but because you have changed. With Christ within us, we see with God’s eyes. God’s eyes are full of love and compassion, generosity and mercy, forgiveness and welcome. When we see the world...every creature along with the planet... the way God sees, everything *will* change because we will desire to change it, we will desire what God desires, and we will, therefore, work with God to change it – change it for the better, to bring God’s kingdom and God’s will on earth as in heaven.

It is this sort of change – from the ground up, from the people outward – that Jesus is talking about in his descriptions of God’s kingdom. The kingdom of God, he explains, is as if someone scatters seed on the ground and then, over time, those seeds sprout and grow without this person doing anything to them. This person doesn’t understand how it is that those seeds are growing, but they’re growing. God has done the work – the world and all that is in it is God’s kingdom. It is in place, and the Holy Spirit is busy calling people to God’s heart, and we don’t need to understand how. God cares for and nurtures the seeds that we plant. And there is an orderly process – a beginning heading toward a promised ending – from the stalk, to the head, to the ripe grain. We don’t need to know how but we do need to be ready with our sickles to gather the people ripened through the Spirit’s work, ripe for the gathering.

How do we do that? There are two things that everyone can do starting right away – some of you already do both...we can talk about church, we can mention God, we can share things from the sermon with our family and friends. And we can make room. We can make room for everyone who walks into our gathering because when a person walks through our door, that person has been called here by God. We can share God's abundance with others – clothes, food, money, fellowship. All that we are and all that we have is from God and, when we see with God's eyes, we will want to share what we have with joy and thanksgiving.

Jesus also tells us that God's kingdom is like the teeny, tiny mustard seed that, when planted, grows into the greatest of shrubs. The greatest of *shrubs*...seriously? Not a big, magnificent tree. A shrub. Here's another time when you need to throw what you know out the window – perhaps you've been told by many a preacher that this is Jesus' way of telling us that, with work and care, small things will grow into big, wonderful things. Perhaps that's true but that's not what Jesus is saying at all. This is not about growing God's kingdom. We do not grow God's kingdom – as I said, it's already in place, waiting for us to reveal it, to polish it to perfection with God's help.

What is Jesus trying to tell us with this mustard seed story? The mustard plants which Jesus and his listeners would have been familiar with, grow – at most – to be about eight or ten feet tall. This mustard is quick growing, it needs very little care yet multiplies like dandelions and spreads out like raspberry bushes. It really looks more like a tangled mess of shrubbery rather than anything like a tree. Interestingly, mustard is an annual plant – growing abundantly then dying at the end of the season and reseeding the ground for the next year. “Let the Church be

the wheat that sows its seed in dying” is a phrase that comes to mind. More on that in a moment. Birds can take shelter in the shade of mustard shrubs and what is not mentioned to us is that the mustard plant is also valued by humans. In addition to being used as a spice, there are many health benefits associated with mustard – it is used to treat snake and scorpion bites, toothache, indigestion, asthma, epilepsy, constipation, dropsy, lethargy, tetanus, leprous sores, and other illnesses...all of this according to the first century writings of Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (160, 162 in *Short Stories By Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine).

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus brought the perfect presence of God’s kingdom into this world in his body and we, the body of Christ, together bear the presence of God’s kingdom to the world. God’s kingdom is not what the world expects – it is not magnificent according to the world’s idea of magnificent. It *is* a fast-growing kingdom, spreading easily, springing to life with very little human care. In fact, Jesus reminds us, God is in charge, God has a purpose, and sometimes we must not meddle – trying to do things our own way – we sow seeds and let God’s purpose unfold. The revelation of God’s kingdom in its perfection will spread.

And, as bearers of the kingdom, we must repeatedly die to be born anew. We die individually to the ways of the world and together, as the church, we must die to the ways of the world. This is what we did in our baptism – dying with Christ and being raised to new life, turning away from the broken ways of the world and embracing the life-giving ways of God’s kingdom. This means letting go of habits and even customs and traditions that, as comfortable as they may be in their familiarity, do not bring the life of the kingdom. This means letting go of the

world's idea of a "great" church, of a successful church. If you think the church was "successful" back in the 'good old days' – with riches, property, and popularity, overflowing with people and money, when politicians and world leaders listened to what the Church had to say – throw those thoughts out the window. Scripture doesn't use the concept of "success." Scripture talks about being fruitful.

Thinking in terms of "success" carries with it the world's idea of power that relies on wealth and material goods. Fruitfulness embraces the church that bears God's kingdom, the church that forgives, that welcomes the outcast, that loves the unlovely, that provides for the needs of the world, following the lead of God the Holy Spirit, ready to harvest what we have sown.

The kingdom of God is like the mustard seed that grows into the greatest of shrubs. God's kingdom is not what the world expects it to be. Let's throw out the world's idea of a great kingdom and be the greatest of shrubs. We *are* in Christ, everything *is* made new. Let us see through the eyes of God.