

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
on Sunday, June 13, 2021, 4 Pentecost, Proper 6-B
by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
Ezekiel 17:22-24, Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14. 2 Corinthians. 5:6-17, Mark 4: 26-34

When I was a Junior in High School, I got my first pair of glasses. On the way home, I remember looking out the car window and exclaiming...I didn't know you could see individual leaves on trees. I used to see just fuzzy green blobs on trees. This is amazing! Everything looks different.

My experience of new glasses is a metaphor or parable. Often, you and I do not see situations or events in life as clearly as we think we do. Sometimes we need a new set of lenses to see more clearly what is going on within us and around us.

In today's Scripture readings both Paul and Jesus are trying to help their listeners and help us see more clearly what it means to live as followers of Jesus in a troubled world.

I wonder, what new lens, what new perspective might God want to give you this morning about your life with Jesus?

Most human beings are taught from an early age to look at life and at other people as everyone else in society looks at them. For example, in the Roman Empire there were pecking orders of who had the most money and power and possessions and popularity. Some people were looked at as worthless losers and some people were seen as successful winners to be admired.

In today's reading, Paul gives us a radically different image of what it means to look a people if we are followers of Jesus. He said to the Corinthians: "The love of Christ urges us on...he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, we regard no one from a merely human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. (Here is the radical punch line). If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" The next verse continues, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Paul tells us that something changed radically when Christ came to live among us. Christ taught us and modeled for us in his daily interactions with the wide variety of people he encountered, that God created us to love all our neighbors, rich and poor, friend and enemies, from all races and religions. Christ, the son of God, emptied himself of all his entitlements and lived as a servant of others, bringing God's healing power to the sick, feeding the hungry, listening with respect to people who were considered outcasts, constantly teaching people how to live as God created us to live. Christ was God's New Creation living on earth as in heaven. And Christ invited everyone to join him in allowing the Holy Spirit to so live in and through us, in

our daily lives, so that we are also new kinds of human beings, a new breed of people with a new DNA, transformed by God's grace and guidance into new creations.

Jesus used the image and metaphor of the Kingdom of God to describe the transformation he came to bring in the way we human beings live. This was the topic Jesus talked about most in the Gospels. He said God is in the process of bringing a New Kingdom on earth as in heaven. Jesus embodied God's Kingdom by who he was and the way he lived. He called his disciples to love God and all their neighbors, to embody the values, the priorities and the relationship with the Spirit of God that he modeled.

The Kingdom of God is not just what we experience when we die, though heaven will be the full expression of God's Kingdom. Jesus taught us that the Kingdom of God is among us and within us right now. God created us to develop the quality of relationship with Spirit of Jesus so that our lives are also embodiments of God's kingdom, God's new creation coming to earth through us, every day, as it is in heaven.

As you listen to the perspective, the lens of Paul and Jesus...does it help you to see the purpose of your life differently? Do you see how important the way you live your life every day is to God?

As Jesus said in his parable, God wants to transform our broken, struggling world through the mustard seed of our lives. As we look around, we can see much good that God is doing in the world through good people. We also see and hear much pain. Again this weekend there have been mass shootings around the country. It's important that we not become numb to the epidemic of violence. Jesus weeps when any of his beloved children are killed or disrespected. Jesus weeps at the levels of spiritual and physical poverty and injustice in our nation and around the world. And God so loved this broken world that God sent Jesus to show us a different way to live, God's way to live in love as Christ loved us.

As Jesus pointed out in today's two parables, God's kingdom is like growing seeds invading, emerging in this world through little mustard seed people, words and actions, working to transform the kingdom of this world into the Kingdom of God.

And Jesus sent us into the world at this time and place so we can live as a new kind of person in this society, just as the early Christians were a new kind of people in the Roman Empire of their day. God used the mustard seeds of little gatherings of Jesus followers scattered around the world to transform the culture of the Roman Empire. There was no big humanly coordinated program, no strategic marketing plan, no mass gatherings to pressure the Roman Government.

The Jesus way of transforming the society was through little cells of ordinary people who gave their lives every day, listening for the Spirit of Jesus to show them, guide them in how to love their neighbors in need. This was the central focus of their lives, scattered in countries all around the world.

Remember, following Jesus was not easy for those early disciples, just like it is not easy for us. The Roman Empire persecuted them, ridiculed them, thought of them as poor foolish marginalized folks. Yet the Christians kept learning to focus their lives each day on their relationship with the Spirit of Jesus and their neighbors in need. They gathered regularly in little support communities to pray for each other, reflect on the Scriptures and words of Jesus, talk about their challenges, fears, failures, learnings together. These little cells of imperfect but Spirit inspired people consistently lived by a different set of values, a different quality of love than the society around them.

The Romans literally abandoned babies they did not want, leaving them out on the hills around Rome to die. The Christians went out every day and found those abandoned babies and took them into their homes. The Romans ignored the poor, the widows and orphans, the hungry immigrants who lived on the margins of society. The Christians got to know these outcasts, loved them, cared for them, fed them, helped them find new life physically and spiritually.

While the Romans persecuted and ridiculed Christians, they also were in awe of them and their persistently radical way of living and loving. "See how those Christians love one another, they said." Christians really were New Creations, living by a very different set of values and priorities than the culture of the Roman Empire. Within a couple of hundred years those little marginalized mustard seed communities of Jesus followers transformed the Roman Empire and the world.

How are we to be God's mustard seeds, God's new creations, embodiments of God's Kingdom personally and as a congregation at this season of our lives?

That's the question today's Scripture invite you and me to ask God and ourselves this week. There is no simple answer or formula for every person here. We will all need to ask the Spirit of Jesus to guide us and show us the way within the uniqueness of each of our lives. I will suggest two little spiritual practices we can do to help us learn more about how to be God's loving new creation people.

First, Prayer. We begin to find the next steps God is inviting each of us to take by asking God to help us every day. In the morning we might pray, Jesus, ignite your Spirit of love within me today. Show me how to think and speak and act as your new creation, a sign of your Kingdom coming into the people around me today.

At the end of each day we might take a few moments to talk with Jesus about what we are grateful for about the day, what signs did we see of beauty, grace and love at work? What did we learn about how to let the love of Jesus flow through us? How did we fail to love as Jesus invited us to love? What can we learn from our failures when new opportunities come our way tomorrow?

Second, we can take time to ask one or two friends of ours to talk with us about what they are learning about the struggles and temptations, the opportunities and joys they are finding as they seek to be faithful followers of Jesus at this season of their lives. Little mustard seed conversations with others on this journey can inspire and sustain us and help us learn more about how to keep maturing as God's new creations, embodiments of God's Kingdom of Love, one day at a time. I know how helpful these little mustard seed conversation can be because I talked with three friends about these questions this past week. Who might you talk with about your questions, struggles and learnings this week?

Let's close our eyes and be aware that the Spirit of Jesus is within us and around us right now:

What do you want to say to Jesus about what you have heard this morning? ...

What might Jesus want to say to you?...

In what new ways might Jesus be inviting you to pray, to talk with people this week, so you can allow the Spirit of Jesus to show you how to be a more loving mustard seed of God's Kingdom, God's New Creation with the people around you?...

O Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.