



Awake to the Reign of God

6/13/21 - Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

I just want to say again that is so good to see you!

We continue to be in a season of graduations, engagements, weddings, retirements, milestones, beginnings, and endings of all types. The ones that I have been to have been characterized by greater freedom of movement and openness. It's been delightful. Perhaps some of you have attended such events this spring or will shortly. They bring all kinds of thoughts to mind.

I wonder if at some time in your life, you've had the experience of gazing at your child, or a child that has been important to you, as he takes his first steps, or as she walks across the graduation stage, or as he says, "I do," or as she hands you a grandchild...and then you're suddenly asking yourself, "Where did the time go?" and recognizing the beauty and power of what is happening.

Just *yesterday* she had a binky in her hand, and then day by day, 1000s of days later, bit by bit, before you knew what hit you, she stands before you, and *today*, instead of a binky in her hand, there is a diploma, or a dream job, or a dream partner, or a baby. And perhaps this happened against all odds, or in the midst of trying circumstances, making the occasion even more poignant. Somehow you did have a role in it, but truly, it was also beyond your power or comprehension that it has happened.

There is a moment of awareness, of awe, of joy perhaps tinged with sadness, of pride, and especially of gratitude and wonder. Something small has mysteriously grown, beyond our power and control, to our delight and sometimes surprise and discomfort. And we recognize it.

Jesus describes the Kingdom of God in such terms in the first of the two parables he tells us this morning: "The Kingdom of God 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."

The Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven is mentioned in the New Testament about 100 times. In the Greek, it's actually a bit more accurate to say the Reign of God. And moreover, the Greek has the sense of action—the Reign of God is not primarily a *place*, but a *condition*, a state of being and becoming.

Jesus proclaimed and explained and demonstrated the Reign of God throughout his ministry, in word and deed. For Mark, in deeds it was especially through his healings. In words it was especially through parables.

At its simplest, a parable is a story from nature or common life that points to, or refers to, something else. It often requires some effort to figure out. It could point the listener in a lot of different directions. There is usually something familiar, yet also strange about it, something that doesn't quite add up for the listeners.

For example, this morning, in the second parable, Jesus says that the Reign of God is like a mustard seed that is the smallest of all seeds, and yet, it somehow grows into a shrub big enough for birds to make

their nests in. His listeners – peasants and others who would have been familiar with the flora and fauna in their region, as well as with the Hebrew Scriptures— might have scratched their heads and said or thought: “Hm. that’s odd. Usually, God’s power is spoken of in Scripture as being like a mighty cedar of Lebanon or some other lofty tree, not a mustard shrub.” Or, they might have thought or said, “There’s no way a bird could build a nest in a mustard shrub. They’re not *that* big or strong.” Or they might have said, “Even though it makes food taste better, or is good for putting on a scorpion sting, you need to watch mustard carefully, because it might grow *anywhere*.”

Or they might have said or thought, “God’s power is present even in a humble mustard plant, because it grows so wildly and extravagantly.”

Don’t discount the mustard seed. Or the Reign of God. It’s everywhere, if we only recognize it. Inviting people to recognize the Reign of God—to see the presence and wonder of God all around us—is one of the main things that Jesus did. Jesus says this in various ways in the Gospels: the Reign of God is within you, or among you, or within your grasp.

Today we recognize a Reign of God moment, as we mark and celebrate the physical regathering together of this Christian Community after fifteen months in a kind of wilderness, where we learned in a way that we would never have chosen, that we can still be the Body of Christ even when we are not gathering in person.

So, consider this riff on the first parable in our Gospel reading this morning; you have read it somewhere else before...

“The Reign of God is as if there were a pandemic, and a congregation shifted its worship services online, and re-imagined its ministries of care, feeding, and study so that people still shared God’s love with one another and the world. People went about their day to day lives, and remained the Church, in ways small and large, although they did not know how....”

Seems to me that we have been living out this parable for the last fifteen months, though in Massachusetts, we might prefer to say the *Commonwealth*, rather than *Reign of God*. Amid politics, pandemic, and protest, we scattered seeds of determination, love, patience, creativity, dedication, and faithfulness which grew by the mysterious power of the Spirit. Each of us had some role to play. Sometimes, we didn’t know how it happened!

Paul tells us this week that if we are in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away, everything has become new.

This may seem like hyperbole for us. Not everything old has passed away for us. Look at us here in our beloved Chapel/Big Church. We’re going to have lemonade and cookies in the Upper Parish Hall; some things never change.



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But we do have a new awareness of how precious our community is.

Like a new-born lamb, we may be a bit unsteady as we seek to adjust to a new reality. We still don't really know what the future looks like for the church. Just as it's become safer to regather in person, we are

beginning summer travel and vacation. Will be people tune in to the live stream? Will we have lost members of our community over the last fifteen months? Will some people prefer to stay at home to watch the live stream? Will families new to town shop for churches based on their broadcasts? What if the vaccinations for our youngest members are not complete? What will Church School and Youth Group look like in the fall? What about pledging? And others. We have questions about how school and work will be organized as well...All questions that we cannot answer.

And therein lies the wisdom of these parables. The growth and health of the Commonwealth of God is ultimately beyond our control, though it requires our participation and especially our awareness.

As we move into this new season of our life together, let's keep scattering seed and watching it grow in ways we had never dreamed of.

Amen.