

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Patricia Rose
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights
on Sunday, June 16, 2024**

I'm holding here in my fingers something to show you, but it's so small that unless you brought your telescope to church today, you probably can't see it.

It's so small I can't even hold it up, so I taped one to a little post it note.

You probably can't see that either, but maybe you've guessed what it is?

Yes, it's a mustard seed.

So here is what Jesus uses to try to help us understand what has been called "the kingdom of God."

Ok, well that's obvious now huh?

Jesus says: "With what can we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, the smallest seed on earth."

What Jesus is offering is at the heart of reality, of deep importance for us as individuals and as humans who move together in families and communities, and of particular value for this community now, in transition.

Jesus is using a familiar, concrete thing to help us to know the subtle, the invisible. But what is paradoxically the most powerful.

A seed small we can barely perceive it, at a distance, we cannot see it. Not only small, but seemingly lifeless. But when sown – when planted and watered - it becomes large enough that living creatures can find a home in it.

Jesus also told us, in another gospel, the gospel of Luke: "The kingdom of God is within you" or some translations say "among you" or in your midst, it's here. It's permeating this place, and our hearts.

And so just as a tiny mustard seed can become a very large, flourishing bush that is alive, and provides a place for rest and nourishment

so too, our tiny, unsure awareness of God's kingdom in our midst can grow into a living flourishing home, our true home for the most important kinds of rest and nourishment, to aid us

in our everyday struggles, anxieties, hopes, In our exhaustion and efforts and anger and deepest hungers.

But how do we come to palpably know this home and feel it?

We might first ask:

What is the kingdom of God that we are trying to come to know?

Even the disciples didn't fully get it while Jesus was alive, sharing all the metaphors, parables, healings, and loving that he shared.

The Greek word for Kingdom is *basileia*. It means realm of God, or the dominion of God,

No wonder it's hard to understand because it's not something we can grasp with our minds alone.

This realm of God is invisible to our eyes, yet it contains so much. It's eternal, outside of time, yet it's here now. It is beyond a solid thing with qualities, yet Jesus continually pointed us to its qualities, and embodied those qualities and taught that we too can embody them.

Qualities like Love. The Joy of giving love or of being loved, seen, being known as loveable.

Qualities like compassion and mercy for ourselves and one another.

Peace, the peace beyond understanding. Christ promised, I leave that to you.

Truth. Truth that sets us free.

Communion and community, not division.

These are qualities, that we instinctively desire, and are made of.

Christ's message about this realm of God is very hopeful.

That it's like a seed that when sown becomes something alive in which we can live, and that it's already with us.

We want to know this kingdom of God, but how?

To know it requires passionate commitment and dedication, just like smaller goals of being physically fit, or learning to play the violin, or becoming an expert in a certain topic.

It also requires awareness, in particular space for our awareness.

If our attention is always gripped by things on screens, or with our thoughts and opinions and demands of what should be, we can miss noticing the realm of God in our midst.

It requires the space of slowing down.

Racing around in our heads and doing things, we're like drivers in a vehicle going 70 mph, speeding by things in a blur with no possibility of seeing a mustard seed. We're skating across the surface, missing the depths of things.

We need pauses.

The other night I was in just such a state of intensely doing work things, but I had an arrangement for a Facetime walk and talk with 2 friends. A big part of me felt that I should keep working, a lot to do, a lot of deadlines.

But I decided not to cancel, mostly due to the encouragement of my friends, not because of my own wisdom to take a pause. And about 20 minutes into the walk, as I arrived at the edge of a lake, two things happened at once.

The first thing is hard to describe briefly, but basically I felt a spark inside, a warm palpable and uplifting vibrance in my heart as some things my friends were saying resonated with a well-worn sense of my own related to God's love with me.

At the exact same time, I noticed a blue Heron in the lake, maybe 10 feet from me, majestic, still as a statue, and then with a regal bearing, she walked in that stillness towards me, lowered herself toward the water, and with inconceivable speed, her beak entered the water, she caught a fish, swallowed it, and stood back up perfectly still again, the only movement was circles in the water rippling out around her.

I felt the power of her stillness, simply being what she is without distraction, a heavenly creature, an expression of God.

Something had shifted inside me. I felt an uplifting lightness. I got off the phone to bask in the stillness, and very soon after, a soft pink appeared in the western sky and within a few minutes the whole aura of the lake changed, purples and pinks flooded the low horizon, and were streaked across the sky and magnified in the lake.

I felt that I had gone from a state of active tension of "must get done things!" to a paradise. If I hadn't paused, I would have missed it entirely.

Our glimpses of God's realm in our midst are not always so obvious as this. Maybe I really needed a strike on the head to get the point!

But in our intentional pausing, we will be fed, often subtly, or perhaps in ways that come later, and always by our pauses slowly building in us the increased sensitivity to perceive and sense the presence of God's kingdom in our midst, offering gifts for us to receive and engage with.

As we at St. Paul's enter this year of transition, I can't help but think what a marvelous gift, an opportunity to pause, to practice pausing *together*. Together we can practice sensing the presence of God's realm among us.

In times of change, anxiety often arises, and our first impulse can be: Let's take action! Let's make a plan! Let's voice our strong opinions and try to shape things according to those opinions.

Yet, while Jesus was leading people on earth, he was always delivering the unexpected - ways not according to people's ideas and opinions. There's so much we don't know. In the prophecy of Isaiah, we hear

“‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts,’ declares the LORD.”

When Jeanne first told the staff she was leaving, she couldn't help crying. And whenever she conveyed the news to people, she often cried, and a beautiful thing I noticed was that her tears were of both great sadness and great joy. Such sadness to be leaving this community that she loves so much, but also a deep joy that I could see in the light in her eyes, and hear when she repeatedly said, “I know I'm doing the right thing, for myself and for St. Paul's. I would never leave if I didn't feel sure that it was right for St. Paul's.”

Knowing her as I've come to know her these past 10 months, I have faith in her spiritual process, in the pauses I know she took that brought her to this clarity in her heart.

And her clarity leads me to wonder: What might God have in mind for this community? For each of us?

There's a beautiful verse in Isaiah where God says: “See, I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness...”

How might we, in these coming days, take the opportunity together, to pause to notice the Kingdom of God in our midst, to make a nest there, to notice where God may be leading us? To support one another in this?

Trusting that it's there, sowing the tiniest seed that becomes a luminous home, our true Home of Love, Truth, Peace. And in this, we become - as Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians today - “A new creation in Christ.”

It's the most important thing we can do.