

THREE AFTER PENTECOST – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.
Amen.

Let's begin with the gospel this morning and move on to St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, because that is not only the order of their occurrence, it is also a progression for our awareness and growth. Jesus is talking about the "kingdom of God." This can be seen futuristically, as in what we shall experience in the next life, but I think Jesus is always trying to ground us in an experience of God's reality—both God's presence and power—in this life. That is certainly true of these two examples he gives, for they are about the natural order, the creation, and because he is talking about plants and bushes and trees and the process of germination and growth, they are certainly "grounding" us in a clear reality. There are no "alternate facts" here, and there is no way to miss the clarity of his message. The cycle of planting, germination, growth and fulfillment, culminating by human harvesting, is the same as we have been taught two millenia later. Jesus knew his science, at least the science of farming (and we might add the care of animals, the seasons of the year, and the predictability of weather). He was a man of the earth in the depth of his humanity. It is interesting that Jesus describes this cycle of growth as something that is happening as we go about our daily lives; it happens whether we pay attention to it or not. It will occur as it does, without any help from us. Oh, yes, over the years, we have decided that we want more—a greater yield, the plant's ability to withstand more seasonal variation or drought or certain insects, and we have decided to invest ourselves in bringing that about. Over these years, we have come to the realization that when we try to change something, we never change merely one thing. There may be some happy accidents as in getting secondary

benefits from making a change, but it is more likely that there may be negative consequences that come with a change and then we have to learn how to accommodate that, so we are not causing harm. The great scientists in the fields of agronomy and farming have had to check their egos at the door of their labs and try to see and understand how a plant is created and given the possibility of bearing fruit or grain or whatever, and they have to learn how to look at that process and understand it from inside out. We people who take the spiritual life seriously might describe those scientists as having to learn to see the essence of the plant, to see what God created it to be. [Admittedly, that is our religious way of naming this.] In any case, looking at the plant with that intensity takes more than a bit of humility. On one hand it means we have to learn reverence for what is there before us, the seed with all its possibilities, the history of countless centuries of germination and growth and fruition, and the very seeds we hold in the palms of our hands, all with the possibility of doing this, going through this very cycle one more time. These scientists also have to have courage, the courage that we humans have the capacity and the invitation to be co-creators with God, to expand on the natural order and make it stronger and more fruitful for a good purpose. I cannot imagine a great scientist in any field going in and not checking expectations at the door, in order to see the essence of things, the natural order.

When I was in high school, I had a wonderful chemistry teacher, and I learned a lot of chemistry. But the most important thing I ever learned from him was this, and it came from his annual summer job working in the chemistry department of a major farm implement company in West Allis, where I grew up. One day, the managers were to meet with a chemist they were looking to hire, and my teacher was asked to have lunch with the two managers and the person they were interviewing.

The morning had gone well for the man, and he was able to share his knowledge and skills. Then lunch came, and without tasting it, the man began to put salt and pepper on his food. That was the end of the interview. I am sure they were polite and finished the day, but he lost his chance at that job, and he lost it because he was supposed to conduct experiments, to try things out, and he had not done that with his food before he ate it. He did not taste it first to find out what it was like, and whether he thought it needed anything more. They did not trust him to do that in his professional life.

That is coming at this matter of the cycle of growth from a very particular point of view, a specialized need for humanity, most particularly how to improve on what is and the reverence needed to be in awe of what is, in order to bring about any true improvement. What about the rest of us? The movie line that comes to mind is, I think, from Gone with the Wind, when Rhett Butler says to Miss Scarlet, "Now don't you worry your pretty little head about that." In other words, the Kingdom of heaven is going on whether you see it or not, whether you realize or acknowledge it or not; the world does not depend on you for everything around you to keep on keeping on.

Jesus also says the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which he describes as "the smallest of all the seeds on earth." It is not. Think of poppy seeds, sesame seeds, celery seeds, and be aware that a multitude are smaller than any of them. Yet the example holds because Jesus is talking about proportion here—the size of the plant in proportion to the size of the seed, and this is quite remarkable. Jesus is also talking about benefit and value and usefulness that comes with that unique seed: it puts out branches, "so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." The bush produces what is of value for current use, and what can go on for another generation; it also has side

benefits, protecting fledglings of another species from the worst effects of the sun on their bare skin.

Very simply, Jesus is saying: "This is what God has done and is doing for us every day of our lives and will in the years to come. Don't spend your time worrying about it. Just be grateful and be at peace with this." We are not told what more Jesus said to his disciples, but since we know from other passages that he was always ready to clarify something further for them, we have to imagine that is the situation here.

Paul accepts this reality of the created order, and he also sees something more. We might say that Paul is living a double life—not a duplicitous life, but in two realms at one time, the inner life, which is within the Spirit, which is marked by awareness of reality that does not come from the natural order, and also in this earthly life which is grounded in the natural order. Paul speaks with confidence and reveals why he has confidence—because he trusts God and lives in faith (hope) and not merely by the revelations of the natural world. Paul also reveals that he would most like to be with Christ all the time, but that he can be content, or "at home" in his body, since that is what has been given him for his soul to live within. That resonates with the faith of the person who wrote the 20th Psalm: "Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses (in other words: possessions, wealth, status and brute strength), but we will call upon the Name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall down, but we will arise and stand upright." It is the old adage once more: "Your faith shall set you free!"

One of the statements Paul makes after he says he hopes that "we (that is, *himself in the Spirit*) are also well known to your consciences," is very arresting. "For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you." "When we are beside ourselves:" does that

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mean he is talking crazy, saying weird and strange things? Not exactly, but he is saying “outrageous and outlandish” things. When Paul describes hope, he is often speaking way above our heads, way beyond what we can imagine in this world—like the reconciliation of two groups in conflict in a church. That’s something we might all like to see, but it is so easy to hold onto our wounds and our slights rather than the possibilities of new life in the Spirit where we may trust one another again. Paul sees that trust happening not just in the future but beginning to happen in the now.

When Paul speaks about love, he is talking about an ocean of love, an all-encompassing love which is way beyond what any of us can fully imagine and permanently deliver to another on this earth, so it is “outlandish.” And yet Paul sees us being surrounded by that love, filled up to the brim with that love, so that it overflows from the core of our beings, and we participate with God in giving it away, and when we do, we realize we still have more than we will ever need, and we can continue to give love away.

This passage ends with a profound declaration from Paul: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” I want to put that in the context of St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, because I deeply believe that is happening here, in fact, I can see it; I can feel it. This faith community has been living in and with the tension of conflict and suspicion for many months, for a few years. Given some things that have been said back and forth, that was a pretty predictable result, albeit painful and regrettable. But there seems to have been no way of imagining something new. Most, if not all of you, were resigned to this being the nature of things, or perhaps their getting worse. I realized when I listened to you during the interview and preparation stage before I arrived, that a large part of the ministry I was called to witness

to here was HOPE. That meant that I had to learn ever new and greater ways to trust the Holy Spirit. I have been in the midst of many conflicts, some involving me and most within the groups among which I have been serving. Time and again, the Spirit has come through beyond "what we could expect or imagine" to give us a way forward, where we had been able to see none. So, I know that is always possible. But it takes work. Some of that work is to focus more on relationships than on our wounds. When we focus on our wounds we get reminded again and again how much we have been hurt, and however true that is, when we focus there, we are not living in the present and we are hurt again, this time by what we are hanging onto. In other words, the second time we do it to ourselves. So, a good part of the work has been about letting go, not dismissing the past as though it never happened, or minimizing it and saying it was not really so bad. To do so is to say our experience was not real; it was. Again, the question is whether or not we want to give in and give up and just stay in that wounded place and nurse our wounds. What makes it hard is this: we cannot trust the other person first. We will never trust them if we hang onto past words and behavior. We have to let go first and then TRY TRUSTING someone else. BUT we can trust the Holy Spirit first. We can trust that the Holy Spirit did not get us into a conflict and certainly does not want us to stay there. It is *that trust* that allows us to do the letting go, gives us a sense of new possibilities, and gives us the courage to begin something new. Many of you entered into that process, for which I thank God.

I must say, I was not particularly optimistic, because I do not trust my optimism to come entirely from God. Optimism seems to be a way that I try to get in control, to shape something for an end that I can see and giving you my solution is no better than the non-solution you had had. Hope, on the other hand, is always about God. That means that I have

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to look toward outcomes that are truly the work of the Holy Spirit: fixing what is broken, mending what is torn, restoring what has been lost, uniting what has been separated, finding a common vision for mission, and building what is new.

My blood pressure was up the week before “the big meeting” that we had prepared for over eight months and more, for a lot was riding on that hour and a half together. It was not perfect. But it was real. People were really listening, trying to understand, trying to come from a caring place rather than letting their suspicions cloud their vision.

The Holy Spirit came through, even in the midst of some things were said that were hard to hear. There were a couple of times we could see and feel the change in body postures—a relaxing—and we moved on with a different tone. In the ensuing weeks, I heard a lot about the parish’s reactions to what had happened as the stories/interpretations were shared, and what I heard contained both relief and a growing hope. I think the telling point was at the Annual Parish Meeting in the middle of May. Discussions were held; questions were asked, statements were made, but none of them came with the barbs of suspicion attached or colored by anger. It seems as though there has been some clearing of our hearts.

Let me end with Paul’s words, because that is what I believe is happening here: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Perhaps, because this is a living, breathing, changing community, we need to put this in the present tense, which may help us to remember that we are always “a work in progress:” *Everything old is passing away; see, everything is becoming new! Amen.*

+JLJ