

What Kind of Kingdom?

Mark 4:26-32

Last month, the world watched as history was made. Meghan Markle, a divorced, bi-racial American actress, got her fairy tale wedding. She married Prince Harry in a ceremony witnessed by millions across the globe. Amid all of the glitz and glamour was the hope that this was a new type of kingdom would change the world as the new generation takes over.

Of course, the makeup of the British royal family doesn't really change things much. Since it's a constitutional monarchy, the royal family mostly has ceremonial duties and authority. As Pastor Mark is fond of reminding us whenever we say the collect prayers, they reign, but God rules. The vast British Empire that the sun once could never set on has changed, and is no longer just a kingdom

For most of us, having a king is an antiquated notion. This country has lasted for over 200 years without one, after all, although after having to work with Congress, most presidents probably long for the days when they could just make things happen. As Mel Brooks said, "It's good to be the king!" But it's also not the best system. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill may have said, "Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others," but he didn't want to go back to a time when the king ruled. As the British comedy group Monty Python put it, "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony."

As Jesus went about his ministry, he talked about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. But when he talked about them, he wasn't inviting his hearers to move to some far off land. He wasn't telling them he was going to have a castle they could come live at. He was telling them how God's rule worked, and how God's rule was coming into the world through his ministry of teaching and healing. The kingdom of God is God's activity—God doing God's thing here on earth, just as it is done in heaven.

And the way God's kingdom comes, the way God's kingdom works, isn't the way earthly kingdoms work. Earthy kingdoms come about in ways that make Game of Thrones look tame. Violence and military victories,

power and politics were all used to make earthly kingdoms.

Jesus' hearers certainly had enough experience with those kinds of kings. King Herod had John the Baptist beheaded, and Pilate, while not a king, represented Caesar and put down rebellion with an iron fist. Kings built their kingdoms with might and guile, and needed to continue to use those things to stay king.

Instead, Jesus taught the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a tiny speck that grows into a giant bush. It doesn't look like much, and most people refuse to call it a tree regardless of size, but it's big enough for the birds of the air to land in it. It doesn't come through violence, it doesn't come through effort, and it doesn't come through power. It comes because God makes it grow.

As Jesus would later tell Pilate, his kingdom isn't of this world. Jesus would only be publicly acknowledged a king on the cross, as he gave his life for the life of the world. His kingdom comes not through the sword, but through sacrifice. It came through his victory over death when he was a victim of death. It only comes by grace. It comes gradually, starting small and growing bigger only as God gives it growth.

These parables of Jesus give us hope and urge patience. They remind us that big things come from small beginnings. The kingdom of God, at the risk of oversimplification, began with just Jesus, then grew with the addition of four disciples, then twelve, then the 120 gathered on the Day of Pentecost. After the Holy Spirit was poured out and brought several thousand to faith through Peter's preaching, the Church began to grow by the hundreds and thousands. Despite persecution by the Jewish religious leaders and Roman authorities, Christianity grew even in the midst of persecution. As Tertullian famously quipped, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church!" Not until the Edict of Milan in 317 A.D., when Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity did the Church come out of the shadows and into the halls of power.

But when that happened, the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world began to be intertwined. As we talked about the council of Nicaea at Fermenting the

Faith last week, that created good points and bad points. The lack of persecution meant the church was finally free to meet together to discuss theological disagreements that had been brewing for years. The church leaders could freely travel and meet. Yet the council was called by Emperor Constantine to unify Christianity to help unify the empire, and over the intervening years, the winners of theological disagreements usually turned out to be whoever had the ear of the emperor. The church became intertwined with the state, and would cause problems that persist to this day.

Will Willimon, former dean of the chapel at Duke University, wrote about this parable that “[t]he church is impaired, the kingdom is endangered, not by the world’s continuing criticism of it as ineffective and insignificant. The church is endangered when we are tempted to derive our status from those forms of power and significance valued by the world.”

Continuing that thought, he wrote “Jesus wants us to think small. Tiny seeds. Unimpressive shrubs. Perhaps Jesus would be impressed by [evangelists or bishops who speak with] the president. But this parable suggests that Jesus might be even more impressed by the pastor in North Dakota who has never even seen the White House, much less talked to the president, because he has been serving the Eucharist for the past 30 years to a hundred souls in a little church at a remote crossroads.”

That temptation to ignore the mustard seed kingdom of God and instead try to force the kingdom of God into the template of the kingdom of the world continues in many ways. Sometimes it comes in the televangelist who asks his followers to donate so he can have a 4th private jet, because 3 just aren’t enough. Sometimes it comes in letting entertainment replacing discipleship in order to watch the church grow quickly. Sometimes it comes in ignoring a leader’s moral failings in order to gain access and influence in the halls of power. Sometimes it comes in authorities quoting scripture telling the church what it should believe or how it should act. In many ways, we’re tempted to grow God’s kingdom on our own, and to see growth as a measure of success.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). When we pray the Lord’s prayer,

when we pray in the 2nd petition for the kingdom of God to come, Luther reminds us that God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” The Kingdom of God, the active ruling and reigning of God, is not limited to a physical location, but is instead in all of creation, where God is at work in the world.

Being a part of God’s kingdom doesn’t come through where you’re born, or who your parents are. It doesn’t come through marrying a prince or princess. It comes through the planting of the seed of faith by the Holy Spirit, through the growth of that faith begins with being watered by Holy Baptism and continues through being fed by the Word and Holy Communion. It comes through being adopted into God’s family, with God our Father and Jesus our brother. It comes through grace.

God’s kingdom may not look big by the world’s standards. But we know God is at work in the world in ways we cannot see or hear or understand. We know God’s kingdom is coming into the world in small, seemingly insignificant ways. We know we’re blessed to be able to let God plant seeds of grace through us. We’re blessed to be a part of God’s kingdom, and for God to make His kingdom grow through us. That’s a great kingdom to be a part of.

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