[**Ezekiel 17:22-24**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=206#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=206#psalm_oth_reading)

[**2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=206#epistle_reading)

[**Mark 4:26-34**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=206#gospel_reading)

A DIFFERENT SORT OF KINGDOM Sermon for June 17

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

I was born and raised in North Dakota, and when people find that out, sometimes they’re curious about what it was like. Lonely, I always tell them, since there were only four of us.

But seriously.  When somebody asks that question, there are really two different kinds of answers you can give.  You can give them some information about the state.  You can say: It’s flat, perfectly flat, flat in a way that you can’t quite imagine unless you’ve been there.  Or you can say: It’s agricultural, or It’s full of Norwegians, or It’s got the biggest sky you’ve ever seen.

Or on the other hand, you can tell them about what it’s like to live there, what sorts of characters emerge out of the wind-swept flat farmland, and how that shapes the way people think and communicate and deal with their life problems.  But even that doesn’t really communicate to people what it’s like to grow up there, since the people you’re talking to haven’t really experienced it.  The best you can do, really, is to try to communicate it in terms of some experiences people **are** familiar with, so that they can sort of have the feel for it.

You might say, for example: “You know what it’s like when you’re visiting a new church you’re thinking about joining and everybody is exceedingly polite and welcoming, and yet there’s this underlying sense that they are sizing you up to see whether you’d fit in?  Well, that’s kind of how people interact in North Dakota.”

You see how inadequate that is?  And yet there’s truth in it.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus gives us a pair of parables of the kingdom of heaven, and clearly he’s engaged in providing the second sort of answer.  He’s not giving physical details about the Kingdom of heaven; he’s trying to communicate something about what the Kingdom is like, what it’s like to live there, and he’s doing so by pointing to an experience with which His listeners might be familiar.

And I think this would be a good point to step back a moment and think about the sort of language Jesus uses, that he had to use if he were going to be able to communicate anything at all to the people he found himself among.

It's very important to realize that just because Jesus was born in a certain time and place, doesn't mean that we can or must restrict our understanding of Him to the conditions of that time and place. In my opinion, that has been one of the major, if not the major, sources of error throughout the last two thousand years in trying to understand Jesus.

The error is to think that God somehow engineered all of human history to lead up to and produce exactly a certain sort of place for the Son of God to enter into history, and that the Hebrew scriptures are a record of God doing that engineering, so that the way to read the Old Testament is to see how they show God preparing the ground for the birth of Christ. But I believe that is fundamentally mistaken.

The wailing of the children of Sodom, the grief of Hagar and the depredations of her son’s sons, the deaths of Tamar’s husbands, the famine of Jacob’s people, the ferocity of the Pharaohs and their vainglorious architecture, the plagues that devastated without moral discrimination, the flood that engulfed the soldiers of a pursuing army and orphaned a multitude of their children, the slaughter at the foot of Mount Sinai, the genocide of the Hittites and Amorites, the rivers of blood that flowed from David’s sword and the avaricious and cruel tyranny of his most famous son, the establishment of an industrialized slaughterhouse at the center of God’s worship, the merciless waves of bestial armies ravaging each other over centuries, the torture of the wise, the murder of the good, the unrelieved sorrow of countless mothers…these were all part of the peaceful Bethlehem setting, the history we read about in the Bible. Did God stage manage all of that? The thought is unthinkable, at least by me.

God had to enter the world somewhere, at some time. And just because it was God’s entrance, that place and time became the most important place and the most important time. But it is a profound mistake to think that we should therefore seek to comprehend God by the categories of that place and that time.

And one of those categories is the category of royalty, of Kings and Kingdoms and thrones and castles and armies and royal attendants. That of course was the form of governance in the surrounding nations during the time most of the Old Testament was written, and continued right down to the time of Jesus and in most places for most of the two thousand years since.

But that category for thinking about the relationship of God to His own creation is exactly what Jesus came to correct. The Kingdom of heaven, as Christ teaches us about it, is not just like an earthly kingdom, only with God sitting on a throne and angels instead of the regular army. No, no, no.

Christ came to show us who God is. Does he show us God sitting on a throne? No, he shows us God sitting on a donkey, on the most humble of pack animals.

Does he show us God sending out his armies to conquer all potential enemies? No, he shows us God on His knees, washing the feet of His followers.

Does he show us God ruling with an iron fist over a vanquished world? No, he shows us God dying from love on a cross.

The fundamental error is thinking about the royalty of Jesus is to think of him as having been some sort of prince in a heavenly kingdom that's just like an earthly kingdom except it's in some spiritual realm, that he put on a human disguise for thirty odd years and dwelt in that costume among us, and then returned to heaven to resume His position.

When Jesus teaches that the first will be last and the last first, he's not saying that there will be a reversal of position, so that the lowliest in the earthly kingdoms will be the most elevated in heaven, and kings of earthly kingdoms will be reduced to servitude in heaven. It's not a sort of spiritualized communism.

He's teaching that what counts as royalty in heaven is entirely different from what it normally is here, and that if we are to begin here and now to prepare ourselves and our thoughts for what heaven is like, then we must direct our lives into channels of service and humility and anonymity, not so that we will receive some recompense or reward once we're in heaven, but because, in heaven, those things **are** the reward.

The prophet Ezekiel shows an awareness of just how different God's way of thinking is from our own when, in a way that is very unlike the way God is thought of in much of the Old Testament, he gives us passages like the one in our reading this morning, and that is undoubtedly why Jesus makes use of it in his own parable. Let's read it again:

*17:22 Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

17:23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

17:24 All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.*

God will bring low the high tree and make high the low, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. God will reverse everything, not in the crude literal sense of simply exchanging positions, making kings servants and servants kings; but in the profoundly difficult sense of changing our very way of thinking about kings and servants. That is what's revolutionary about Christianity. That's why it is the 'narrow' way.

It's the same insight we find in Paul, when he says:

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.*

What is the human point of view of Christ? That he is a king like an earthly king is a king. But it is exactly because people wanted to think of him that way that Jesus fled from the crowds up onto a mountain when they tried to crown him.

Paul writes*: So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

What has become new is much deeper than our moral character; it is our whole way of seeing the world.

So to return to our parables, they quite certainly are parables about the way the kingdom of heaven expands. But they are not saying that what happens is like what happens when a small earthly kingdom begins to gain influence over its neighbors, or even the way the Christian church has broadened its influence over the centuries. Jesus has no interest in political prophecy. His interest is here and always exclusively in speaking to each individual soul.

So what do these parables teach? They teach that every time you stop whatever you're doing to meet the need of someone, you're planting a seed that God's spirit within you can begin to cultivate.

They teach that each time you refuse to take revenge, on however small and insignificant a scale, each time you bite your tongue instead of spreading a word of malicious gossip, each time you deflect praise from yourself, much as you'd love to experience it, each time you trust in the words of Jesus rather than those of your own common sense or sense of fairness, each time you honor someone else's opinion and value someone else's time as much as you honor and value your own...each time you do any of those things or the countless others that every day offers as opportunities to follow Christ, that you are sowing the seeds into your own life that Christ's own spirit, in Christ's own mysterious ways, and by Christ's own heavenly power, can carry on the work that Paul calls 'new creation.'

So heavenly Father, this morning we pray that our eyes may be opened to a new way of seeing things. We pray than when we look at the power and status and wealth of others, we see them the way Jesus sees them: as heavy burdens to bear, as problems that Jesus would love to help them deal with, if they would only ask Him. We ask that you would drain the devilish joy of 'getting even' from our hearts, that you call us up short when we find ourselves bragging, however well we disguise it, even when we disguise it from ourselves. We pray for modesty and humility, not as means for something else, but as ends in themselves, because Jesus was himself modest and humble, and he wants us to be like Him. That's why we pray for these things in His name.