



June 16, 2024

## **Bishop Michael Pryse**

### **Eastern Synod**

*Mark 4:26-34*

*He also said, '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 earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'*

*He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'*

*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

*The Gospel of the Lord. ~*

During the few brief years of his public ministry, one thing Jesus never tired of describing was the kingdom of heaven: the reign of God. Often, he did so by using parables, stories or images from lived situations that his listeners could readily identify with. But Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom often came as a contradiction to what his listeners expected or want to hear. They sought a new reign—a new kingdom—that would come to God's people in a big way; powerfully, decisively and quite deservedly! But, instead, Jesus persists in describing the kingdom as a reality that comes slowly, unexpectedly, and undeservedly!

It's all about grace and the parables included in today's Gospel lesson are pictures that describe a kingdom of grace, a reign of grace. Seed is scattered, it sprouts, and grows! We know not how! And yet we reap the harvest! The tiny mustard seed grows into a tree that becomes a nesting place for the birds of the air! The birds didn't and couldn't do anything to make it happen. The seed—the kingdom—grew of its own volition and nature! It's pure grace!

The rhetorical weight of Jesus' many descriptions of the reign of God, in these and so many other parables, is all about the graciousness and universal breadth of the reign of God. They teach us that kingdom of God is a free and undeserved gift that you can't earn, create, or manufacture.

These lessons point us toward the very heart of the Christian Gospel and describe with clarity and power the wondrous message of God's good and gracious intentions toward the world and its inhabitants! We can never stray beyond the reach of God's grace. No matter what happens to us in life; no matter what wrong choices we make or sins we commit—there is always a gracious, loving and forgiving God who waits with arms open to welcome and receive us.

This is, indeed, good, affirming, grace-filled news; news that is very different from the bad news messages that the world tries to convince us of; messages that come at us every day ...sometimes from other people...sometimes from our own minds...certainly through social media and advertising. And sadly, those messages often come to us in the guise of religion.

You know the kind of messages I'm talking about? "Not good enough...not faithful enough ...not spiritual enough. Not pretty enough...smart enough...or flexible enough. Not aggressive enough, successful enough or progressive enough. Not fast enough...young enough or old enough."

And invariably, there is a follow up message. All you have to do is take this course, read this book, wear this paint; go to this store; or follow this diet and then everything will be fine! But in this economy, no matter what you do to overcome a particular inadequacy, you can never

quite make it can you? That's just the way it is when you are in bondage to the false gospels that define our ultimate value on the basis of works or self-image.

But the Gospel tells us something quite different and reveals these collective lies for what they are. Our ultimate value is not based on works or self-image but upon who God says that we are in Christ Jesus. It's well described in that wonderful passage from 1 Peter, chapter 2 where we read, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

We aren't "no people" we are "God's people!" Once there was no mercy, but now, in Christ we have received mercy. Our loving heavenly father is always waiting with arms open to welcome us. As such we are a royal priesthood, God's own people. We're not children of darkness...children of shame. We're children of light...children of grace. We have received a new truth...a new truth born in Christ Jesus that pulls us from the downward spiral of despair and sets us on an upward trajectory of grace!

You have often heard it said that the church is like a family. And certainly, the most important thing a family does for us it to tell us who we are. The family gives us identity ... gives us place ... gives us, hopefully, a true sense of self.

That is one of the church family's essential tasks...to tell us who we are...to nurture and sustain the baptized in their God-given identity. That's part of what we do every week in our worship services. "Rise and go, your sins are forgiven." The body of Christ given for you." "Go in peace, serve the Lord." We're practicing the virtues of the kingdom. We're affirming and building up our essential and fundamental identity as baptized children of God...an identity that we're always growing into...always experiencing in a fuller way.

Think of baptism, if you will, as a garment. Only it's kind of like the sweaters that your mother would buy for you when you were a kid. Remember...arms down to the knees? She always bought them a few sizes too big so that you "had room to grow into them." Baptism is kind of like that. Galatians talks about baptism as "putting on Christ." But baptism is a garment that we're always growing into...always in the process of filling out.

Luther called baptism a "once and for all event which takes your whole life to complete." I really like that! Baptism happens but once...but it is a beginning point in a never-ending process of renewal. We're always growing into it...always in the process of reclaiming its promises and benefits. Baptism gives us an identity...but it also gives us a purpose and a task that we carry with us throughout our earthly lives.

It has been said, and wisely so, that it is only by being little that we can ever discover anything that is big. To a small child everything seems big. Mom and Dad are like giants. You go to school for the first time and the place is huge! It's only when you grow up that you come to see that mom and dad weren't so big after all, and that the vast school only had eight classrooms. When you are little, everything seems big. Likewise, in matters of faith, it's only by being little that you can really imagine and experience those things that are big.

I think this is also a key point of the gospel. The kingdom that Jesus describes is always recognized from a perspective of smallness and humility; a perspective where the first become last and the last become first. And maybe the only way for us to start recognizing the reign that Jesus points toward, the only way for us to experience God's reign of grace more fully; the kingdom of heaven; is by taking the risk making ourselves just a little bit smaller; like a mustard seed!

Today we are given an opportunity to renew our residency in that special kingdom whose embrace has come to us as a gift that is predicated fully and completely upon God's grace; not upon what we have or don't have; not on what we've done or not done. The kingdom is already within us and around us! God's already given it! All we need to do is live it! AMEN.