

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 17, 2018,

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

Today's sermon will be a little different. I would like to speak about the current situation regarding immigration and asylum seeking people and the response of our government.

The stories of children being taken from the embrace of asylum seeking moms and dads are heart-breaking and inhumane. How could we as a nation have come to this point to have a government that seeks such cruel policies to persuade people fearing for their lives not to seek asylum in the United States of America?

Attorney General Jefferson Sessions quoted the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans and said, the people need "to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order" to justify the policy that those crossing the border and seeking asylum have broken the law, and needs to be prosecuted. He was proof-texting, and taking a biblical text to argue for the policy of prosecuting families seeking asylum. Although the Apostle Paul advised the early church in Rome to obey the laws of even the cruel Roman Empire, there are no biblical arguments to separate children from their parents who are seeking asylum. In fact, the biblical witness calls on God's people to care for the orphan and widow, and stranger in our midst for we were once sojourners in a strange land.

He has taken Paul's admonition totally out of context. The apostle Paul, although he claimed to be a citizen of Rome was not part of the government as is Attorney General Sessions. He was advising the Christians in Rome who were primarily not citizens of the Roman Empire to live under an ethic of love and to not trust in worldly power, but to trust in the reign of God. In fact, the biblical witness is full of stories of God siding not with the powerful, but those threatened by powerful rulers who did not honor God or humanity. The story of Moses is the story of God intervening in the person of Moses to liberate Hebrew slaves and oppose powerful Pharaoh. The story of Abraham and Sarah is the story of migrants seeking a new home who were often unwelcomed and abused. Our first lesson for today from Ezekiel is the story of the Jewish exiles in Babylon being encouraged to hope once again even though their nation had been destroyed and they were brought to Babylon as slaves. It would be God who would plant a sprig of a cedar tree and plant it on a high mountain, alluding to how God would plant the exile community once more on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. And in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is speaking to the ordinary people of his time who were oppressed under Roman rule and taught them about a different kingdom, the reign of God.

It is difficult for us to remember this, because we live in what could be called "the American Empire." Most of us are citizens of this great nation. We benefit from its liberties, its material abundance and its military might. We may be citizens of the United States of America, but we are called first to be citizens of the reign of God.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God being like seed planted by someone who sows it and then it grows mysteriously until it is time to harvest. Earlier in chapter 4 of Mark's gospel, Jesus told the parable of the sower, and how the seed represents the Word of God, and four kinds of ground. Each kind of ground represents the condition of the human heart. The road is so hard that the seed cannot enter, and thus the human heart cannot receive the Word of God. The rocky soil allows the seed to enter, but because there is no depth of soil, the seed

sprouts and becomes a plant and withers and dies. Thus, the Word of God begins to enter the human heart, but because of a lack of care (prayer, faithful fellowship, reading of scripture, the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation) the heart is not changed. The thorny ground represents the human heart that is tempted by the cares of the world, and all the other cares of life choke out the Word of God in a person's life. But the good soil is the human heart in which a person has done his or her own inner work, has dug deeply into the story and meaning of life, has dug out the hard parts of one's story, has removed many temptations, and makes time to care for the soul. In this person, the Word of God mysteriously changes a person from someone who is primarily self-interested to a person who is interested in the well-being of others. And it produces a hundred-fold in acts of love.

In our lesson from 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul says that the love of Christ lives within us, and we regard no one from a human point of view anymore. As Christians who have died to the old self and been reborn as children of God in Christ Jesus we are indeed a new creation. How God does this is indeed mysterious.

In the second parable from today's lesson a tiny mustard seed is used to illustrate how it grows to be a bush large enough to provide shades for the birds of the air. Note, that the kingdom or reign of God needs not be anything mighty such as a cedar tree; it can be a bush. What is important is not the size or the power, but the service provided. Shade is provided to the birds, all kinds of birds, not necessarily birds of one kind. The reign of God is like this; it is indiscriminate in who is worthy of this love. Asylum seekers with children need God's love. Immigrants seeking a better way of life need God's love. Even those who try to keep people out needs God's love.

When the Word of God is planted in our hearts and we are mysteriously transformed into a new creation as the children of God, we seek to share our love indiscriminately with all, even with those who have not yet been transformed.

How then do we respond to people who have misused and misrepresented the gospel of Jesus Christ as I believe the Attorney General has done? We must be willing to speak out, but first we must listen intently, deeply and with love so that the seed of God's Word may be planted in their hearts as well.

I would like to use the story of the Risen Lord on the Road to Emmaus in the Gospel according to Luke as the model for how we are to both speak after we have listened well. In this story two followers of Jesus are walking home despondently from Jerusalem after they have witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and heard of the resurrection experiences. They were walking home defeated, as they had lost hope. They believed that Jesus would be the Messiah to return the people of the Jews to the kingdom of David. Then the Risen Lord walks besides them and listens to them. They tell them their interpretation of these events. And the Risen Lord listens intently. After listening, he then re-interprets the meaning of these events and explains how God's Messiah had to suffer, be killed and then be raised. And when they broke bread together, they recognized that it was the Risen Lord in their midst.

We are called to walk alongside people, and listen to their stories, and knowing what God has done for us in Jesus the Christ can tell our story of how our eyes were opened, and that there is no need to live in fear, but rather to live in love. Our hope is not only that the vulnerable will be treated with dignity and compassion, but that those who live in fear may too have their hearts

softened so that the seed of God's love may grow in their lives and they too will be a new creation.

So I invite you to speak out for the gospel of God's love after you have listened well. Do not be afraid to stand and speak out especially for those who are vulnerable to the powerful.

Amen.

I propose to show that the reign of God mysteriously transforms us into a new creation so it changes not only us but spreads to change the world in which all people and the creation itself is valued as beloved of God.

In preparation for this coming Sunday's worship, please pray this coming Sunday's Collect of the Day and read and reflect on the lessons assigned as printed below

The Collect

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your lovingkindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Job 38:1-11

The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

"Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—
when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped!'"

The Response

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

Confitemini Domino

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, *
and his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 Let all those whom the LORD has redeemed proclaim *
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.
- 3 He gathered them out of the lands; *
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
- 23 Some went down to the sea in ships *
and plied their trade in deep waters;
- 24 They beheld the works of the LORD *
and his wonders in the deep.
- 25 Then he spoke, and a stormy wind arose, *
which tossed high the waves of the sea.
- 26 They mounted up to the heavens and fell back to the depths; *
their hearts melted because of their peril.
- 27 They reeled and staggered like drunkards *
and were at their wits' end.
- 28 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
- 29 He stilled the storm to a whisper *
and quieted the waves of the sea.
- 30 Then were they glad because of the calm, *
and he brought them to the harbor they were bound for.
- 31 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy *
and the wonders he does for his children.
- 32 Let them exalt him in the congregation of the people *
and praise him in the council of the elders.

The Epistle

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return-- I speak as to children-- open wide your hearts also.

The Gospel

Mark 4:35-41

When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

The Collect

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Ezekiel 17:22-24

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.
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.
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.

The Response

Psalm 92:1-4,11-14

Bonum est confiteri

- 1 It is a good thing to give thanks to the LORD, *
and to sing praises to your Name, O Most High;
- 2 To tell of your loving-kindness early in the morning *
and of your faithfulness in the night season;
- 3 On the psaltery, and on the lyre, *
and to the melody of the harp.
- 4 For you have made me glad by your acts, O LORD; *
and I shout for joy because of the works of your hands.
- 11 The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, *
and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon.
- 12 Those who are planted in the house of the LORD *
shall flourish in the courts of our God;
- 13 They shall still bear fruit in old age; *
they shall be green and succulent;
- 14 That they may show how upright the LORD is, *
my Rock, in whom there is no fault.

The Epistle

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

We are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord-- for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. 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. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

The Gospel

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus 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 that 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.
