

The 4th Sunday after Pentecost
June 17, 2018
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

1 Samuel 15:34—16:13
Psalm 20
2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17
Mark 4:26-34

“We now know what God might look like ...”

Those were the opening words of a story picked up in our local paper this past week. You may have seen it, if not in the traditional newspaper then another version of the same story picked up by the internet and replayed on social media. The story describes some research done by a group of psychologists from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.



To be fair, it's clear that the psychologists never set out to tell anyone what God might look like. The study, from what I can tell, was cleverly conceived and offers a fascinating demonstration of ways our individual political persuasions, as well as age and gender, seem to affect our images for God. In the end, though, all the study really demonstrates is that we all have biases, and our biases likely distort how we see God. (That's all, though it's really quite a lot.)

If we think we know what to look for when looking for God in the world around us, it may well be that our preconceived ideas will make it harder for us to see a God who delights in surprising us, showing up in ways not expected. And not always wanted. It's a point to bear in mind as we consider our readings here this morning.

Our first reading this morning is a continuation from last Sunday's first reading. Last week, we heard about when the people decided that they wanted to be like other nations and have a king to rule over them. Samuel thought it was a bad idea, and he told them so. But they were determined to have a king, so, in the end, they got one.

We skipped what happened next. Saul was made the first king, but, long story short, it didn't work out. So we begin this morning with Samuel in grief and God wishing the deed had never been done. But for the sake of the people, they try again. Maybe a new king will be better.

Make no mistake, this is a tale of treachery and treason. The old king, after all, is still alive and in charge as God and Samuel arrange to anoint a new king. (Think "Game of Thrones.")

Samuel takes his life in his hands when he sets out. He's scared. And the villagers get nervous, so he tells them he's just come to worship God with them. He invites Jesse to come to make sacrifice with him ... and, without telling him why, Samuel tells Jesse to bring his sons.

And then, it becomes clear, very quickly, that even Samuel, God's appointed prophet, doesn't understand God. He takes one look at Eliab, and swoons. But God corrects Samuel's eyesight:

*"Looks aren't everything. Don't be impressed with his looks and stature ...
GOD judges persons differently than humans do. Men and women look at the
face; GOD looks into the heart."*

1 Samuel 16:7 (*The Message*)

So then, one after another, Jesse presents his other sons to Samuel. Jesse presents Abinadab, but God says no. Jesse presents Shammah, but God says no. Four more sons. Four more rejections.

In some exasperation, Samuel asks Jesse if has any other sons. There is another, of course, but he's the one that his own father failed to notice. He was the runt of the litter, the eighth of Jesse's seven sons. He was the one left to tend the sheep! (Which should have been a big clue, by the way. A king is supposed to tend to the needs of the people like a shepherd tends a flock.)

And I used to think what comes next was an amusing detail. I'm not so sure any longer. I'm more inclined to be dismayed. For David arrives on the scene, and the first thing we're told is that, basically, he's drop-dead gorgeous! Good complexion. Beautiful eyes. Handsome.

For my part, I think it's an editorial gloss. We're supposed to accept, I suppose, that although God chose David for his heart, it doesn't hurt for him to look good, too. The storyteller maybe couldn't help it and just had to believe that David had beautiful eyes to go with his beautiful heart. Or perhaps, it was just a good way to make sure the king would allow the story to be told at all. But either way, it contradicts the whole point that God looks at the heart of a person and everyone else – explicitly Samuel and Jesse ... everyone is a bit "hard of seeing."

If everyone is "hard of seeing," then there may be good news in the first of the parables from this morning's gospel. We might hear from this story that we're not supposed to see everything correctly from the start, so don't to sweat it. The whole thing's a mystery, in the end:

*“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, **the farmer] does not know how.**”*

Now I should allow that parables are notoriously open to various interpretations, so I might be wrong, but I think a point worth considering may simply be that, when it comes to how God is at work in the world around us, we’re not able to see all that well. At least not from the start.

Yet, wonder of wonders, we hold that God truly is in the midst of it all with us.

Agriculture was a mysterious process then. It still is, truth be told. Martin Luther said that “if you could understand a grain of wheat, you would die of wonder.”

God works in mysterious ways. We don’t understand how. We cannot dissect it. The Roman Catholic priest and writer John Shea once told a parable of his own, about a farmer who ...

every day uncovered the soil to see how the seed was doing. [The farmer] wanted to catch each moment in the interaction between seed and soil and intervene in their natural love-making. [The farmer] did not trust the seed and soil to produce growth without ongoing adjustments. Nothing grew.ⁱ

It’s a point to consider, one that cautions us against believing we control how God works in the world. We can help sometimes, of course; we can plant a seed, but we cannot make it grow.

Humility is part of the point, I suppose. But more, I think Jesus points us toward awe and wonder. Because, at least as Jesus tells the parable, our inability either to see or to control the outcome takes nothing at all away from trusting that God is at work, giving life and growth. Our job is not to make anything happen, merely to rejoice when life pops up in front of us.

And then there’s the parable of the mustard seed.

It’s a funny little story. Jesus compares God’s being at work among us to a mustard seed. It’s the smallest of seeds, he says, but it grows and becomes ... Well, this is where it takes a bit of a turn.

... the seed grows and becomes ...

the greatest of ...

wait for it!! ...

the greatest of all SHRUBS!

It’s a joke Jesus tells, a joke about a God who delights in surprising us, showing up in ways not expected. And, truth be told, not always welcome.

If it were the point he intended, Jesus could have picked any plant to make the point that small beginnings can grow into something grand. A towering cedar is the most obvious example from Jesus' day. A small seed is planted and a tree grows 100 feet in the air.

But that's not the story Jesus tells. He tells a story about a mustard seed. And mustard seeds grow into something not so much impressive as invasive. The mustard plant was a weed in Jesus's day. It was prohibited from a cultivated garden because once allowed, it would take over the garden. A mustard plant rather profoundly disrespects any gardener's attempt to impose order and neat boundaries. And that, Jesus says, is an apt image for God.

The Lutheran scholar Matt Skinner offers this perspective on the parable:

Fussy people might deem this uninvited plant to be too much of a good thing. Others might consider it a nuisance, but what about those who, like the birds, need a home where they can be safe? They will be happy.

Oh, the birds. I neglected to mention the birds.

If this were a story about a mighty cedar, the birds who built nests would be large birds, noble creatures. But the kind of birds who take shelter in the shade of a mustard plant, seeking safety from a fox, perhaps, are small birds, dime-a-dozen sparrows. The kind of birds who eat the seed planted in the garden. They're undesirable birds, the kind NOT wanted by a gardener.

Back to what Matt Skinner says:

The parable ... promises to upend a society's ways of enforcing stability and relegating everyone to their "proper" places. The reign of God will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places. ⁱⁱ

I often recall a line from one of our hymns: "There's a wideness in God's mercy." I hold that it is a true and edifying line for us to affirm. And "there's a *wildness* in God's mercy," as well. God will not likely be content to stay within any of our carefully-ordered gardens.

This parable of Jesus, on the heels of the first one we heard this morning, says that the God who works mysteriously is the God who also works subversively, opposing any of our attempts to draw straight lines in the world that aim to keep people in their proper places.

Now that's pretty much all I intended to say to you this morning. I didn't intend to get political today. But I started feeling really uneasy about all that yesterday.

You see, when a politician weighs in on religion, citing Scripture to justify appalling political decisions and practices, it seems a preacher may be obliged to respond.

After all, our opening prayer this morning spoke of the call for the Church to “proclaim [God’s] truth with boldness, and minister [God’s] justice with compassion.”

This past week, you may have heard that a verse from Romans 13 was cited to suggest that it is God’s will for today’s appointed officials to govern and that it is God’s will for all the governed to follow dutifully the laws and ways their currently being enforced. And this verse was cited specifically to say that everyone should, therefore, support the immigration laws as they are currently being applied to separate children from families seeking asylum at the U.S. border.

Both the premise (that law and order are paramount) and the practice (of cruelty at the border) are deeply disturbing. And that particular verse has a particularly troubling history. Nicolas Knisely, the bishop of Rhode Island, tweeted yesterday that this passage has been a proof-text in American history twice before: to oppose the Revolutionary War and to oppose the abolition of slavery. (This passage has also been used to squelch resistance to the Holocaust in Nazi Germany and apartheid in South Africa.) Those are not ennobling and sacred precedents.

And not only was the verse in question used as a proof-text, it was also taken out of context. For in the verses that follow in that very same chapter, Paul goes on to say what Jesus himself said: that the greatest commandments are to love God and our neighbor.

And if drawing straight lines to keep people in line (or in their proper places) ever comes into conflict with the love of neighbor, love of neighbor is ALWAYS the right choice. (And I remind you, further, that Jesus was very clear to say that “neighbor” is simply the next person you meet. Whoever that person is. Wherever that person is from.)

It begs the question of which is more reprehensible: to engage in acts that are a violence to the most vulnerable of persons and their families? or to use the Bible to justify it?

The stories in today’s readings are all cautionary tales. They remind us that we too-easily distort God and God’s hopes for the world; we are “hard of seeing” too often. I think we would do well to be very careful here, for I suspect God delights very little in our carefully-manicured gardens and our straight lines.

We easily distort what God looks like. So a little humility is in order, lest any of us over-confidently assert that we know how God works. But that need not diminish, as Jesus tells us, our confidence in God’s abiding presence with us. And we should celebrate the gift of life given to us whenever it springs up in our midst and in our world.

God’s face is so often unseen by us. But God is always there for us to see in the face of every one we meet, every child of God who is our neighbor. So we continue to keep our eyes open for God among us, even in our messed-up world, our untidy gardens, and our disordered lives.

ⁱ John Shea, in *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year B, Eating with the Bridegroom* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2005), p. 151.

ⁱⁱ Matt Skinner @ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3676.