

Pentecost 3B 13 June 2021  
Mark 4:26-34; 2 Corinthians 5:6-19; 1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and Peace to you, dear Saints, from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*He [Jesus] 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." Let's pray:*

Look at the image on the screen and tell me what you see. Who sees a young lady? Who sees an old woman? Who sees something else?



"My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" is a famous optical illusion that depicts both an old woman looking off to the left and a young woman facing away, looking over her right shoulder. (The old woman's nose is the young woman's chin.) (Image credit: public domain)\*

We live in a world where many people believe that what you see is what you get. People trust their eyes to reveal what's real and what's true. This approach certainly has its benefits. It's easier, definitive, and more efficient. It's not, however, without problems. A what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude assumes that life is limited to physical and tangible realities. It's superficial and it puts humanity at the centre as the final interpreter and arbiter of life. Now, I for one, am a poor judge of many things.

I'm sometimes guilty of seeing what I want to see, what I've been taught or told to see, and what I expect to see. And just because we look at the same thing doesn't necessarily mean we see the same thing. Three eye witnesses to an accident will most often tell three different stories of what they saw. Merv and Robert would attest to this observation from their professional lives as police officers.

Take the story of St Francis preaching to the birds, for example. His companions were undoubtedly enjoying their camaraderie, their journey, and the surrounding countryside. They would have been aware of their environment generally, but probably paid scant attention to particular details. St Francis, however, saw things differently. Francis had great love for animals and was especially fond of the birds of the air. He liked to refer to animals as his brothers and sisters.

As the story goes, Francis went right up to a flock of birds and kindly urged them to listen to the word of God, saying, "Oh birds, my brothers and sisters, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator, who clothed you in feathers and gave you wings to fly with, provided you with pure air and cares for you without any worry on your part." Apparently, the birds showed their joy in a remarkable fashion: They began to stretch their necks, extend their wings, open their beaks and gaze at him attentively.\*\*

It is reported, "He went through their midst with amazing fervour of spirit, brushing against them with his tunic. Yet none of them moved from the spot until the man of God made the sign of the cross and gave them permission to leave; then they all flew away together. His companions waiting on the road saw all these things."\*\*\*

What his companions saw was a "flock of birds", whereas, Francis, saw a congregation of kingdom brothers and sisters, albeit feathered friends, and an opportunity to proclaim the gospel of their Creator's love.

You see, dear friends, what we see isn't so much determined by the thing seen, but by how we see. I'm convinced that one of the main purposes of the Bible and the Church's sacred doctrine is to teach us how to see, not just to tell us what to see. St Paul reminds the Corinthians that "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Samuel looked on Eliab and thought he was the

Lord's anointed, the next king after Saul. 'But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart"' (1 Samuel 16:6-7).

Human-seeing is easily distracted by outward appearance. God-seeing, however, is inwardly focused and heart based. I'm not suggesting that we should reject outward and visible appearances; rather, acknowledge and accept that our life and world isn't limited to what we see. For every outward appearance we see there is a deeper, inner reality.

A what-you-see-is-what-you-get way of living is too limited, too narrow, too small. It obscures the fullness of God's life and presence among us. It offers no hope for reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, and transformation. It says to us, "This is as good as it gets." If that's how we see our life and the world then we need to learn to see differently. God-seeing reveals that in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Holy Spirit is always inviting us to see more deeply. That's what Jesus' parables are about. They are the lens that helps human-seeing come into alignment with God-seeing. They allow us to peek into God's kingdom while looking at the things of this world. Parables stretch us to see in a different way. They rarely give answers. Instead, they sharpen our focus and cultivate a deeper vision. Parables ask us to let go of a what-you-see-is-what-you-get world and trust that what we see is not all there is. There's always something more going on than what we see. There's always a kingdom filled with the presence of God.

The kingdom of God is intimately woven into creation. God is always at work in our lives like a seed scattered upon the earth. Just as a seed does its seed thing, the kingdom does its kingdom thing. This can be very difficult to understand. At times, outward appearances may even suggest God is absent. It may look like nothing is happening. We sleep and rise. We wait. We trust. We hope. We pray. We go about the ordinary work of life. But it's within that ordinariness that the life of God has already been planted in each one of us. One day it sprouts. It grows. The invisible becomes visible. We now see what has always been. The full harvest is always there hidden in the seeds. It may often be invisible but it's never absent.

In first-century Palestine, mustard was considered a weed. Jesus compares the kingdom with such weeds. Now, why would he do that? What is it about them that Jesus uses weeds as a metaphor to describe the kingdom of God? Weeds always pop up where and when you least expect them to. No matter how hard you try, weeds are impossible to eradicate, and, they have a habit of taking over. That sounds to me exactly how God operates. Just as weeds take over, so does the kingdom of God. You can refuse to plant it. You can pull it up. You can cut it down. You can even poison it, but regardless of what you do to it, it just keeps coming back. No person or situation is ever Godforsaken.

Compared to the needs of the world the kingdom can often look small, insignificant, and inadequate; like a mustard seed. Looks, however, can be deceiving. It's only an optical illusion. Rest assured that the kingdom will take over.

The birds, seeds, and weeds of life are everywhere. Don't just look at what you see. Search deeply for what is there. Look again if you need to. Look more deeply. Change how you see.

Behind every bird, seed, weed, and human calamity, is the faithfulness, promise, and power of God to change lives: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). And if everything has become new, then the kingdom of God is here, and you can rest confidently and peacefully in its shade. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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\*<https://www.livescience.com/63645-optical-illusion-young-old-woman.html> accessed 08/06/2021.

\*\*<https://www.historyplace.com/speeches/saintfran.htm> accessed 08/06/2021.

\*\*\*<https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/st-francis-and-the-birds> accessed 08/06/2021.

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