

# Sermon: Pentecost 4

The Rev. Mike Wernick

June 17, 2018

Year B

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Psalm 20

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

We heard last week... we were reminded last week... by Sara... about the many cons... the many negatives... of having a King... and one that really stands out for me... one that seems to remain true throughout changing times... is that having a human King... instead of a divine Sovereign... means that I can abdicate my personal authority and responsibility... instead of owning them... it means I can maintain an outer reference point... instead of developing an inner one... it means I can complain when I don't like how I'm being ruled... and find ways not to listen... instead of becoming a self-differentiated... disciplined disciple... who discerns... it means I don't have to let God write God's Law on my heart... so that I can intuitively hear God's Word and own God's Wisdom... the way Samuel did...

And in 1Samuel 15:17... Samuel said to Saul... *Though you are little in your own eyes... are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you King over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission...* but the people Saul ruled did not listen... were not obedient... they were told not to... but they took from those they conquered... the spoils of war... some of which they said they'd sacrifice to God... and Samuel said to Saul...

Has the LORD as great delight... in burnt offerings and sacrifices...

as in obeying the voice of the LORD?

Surely... to obey is better than sacrifice...

and to heed... better than the fat of rams...

For rebellion is no less a sin than divination...

and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry...

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD...

God has also rejected you from being King.

*And the Lord was sorry... that he had made Saul King over Israel...* the NRSV translates the Hebrew word *nee-ham*... as sorry... which implies that God regretted what God had done... that God didn't know what would happen... as we are sorry when we don't know how a thing will turn out... but God did know... through Samuel God warned the people what would happen if they had a king... but the word which is translated as sorry... also means... *to be moved to pity and to have compassion for others*... so God knew what the people would do... but still had compassion on them... when they did it...

In today's reading from 1 Samuel... God asks Samuel how long he's going to grieve over Saul being a bad king... *Get over it...* God says... *I've already made other plans... there's no holding me back... since you all want a King... I've picked another one from among the sons of Jesse... and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you...* the one whom I name to you... you'll have to listen... maybe with your inner ear... with your heart... *for the Lord does not see as mortals see... the Lord looks on the heart...* and David may have been ruddy... and had beautiful eyes... and been handsome... but God looked on his heart... and Samuel anointed him...

And when David was anointed... he was not the man he'd become... he was not yet the King David we know... he grew... he was formed... there were some harsh consequences for some of the things he'd done... but God chose him to be God's own ancestor... David became... and we are all becoming... even when we think we've fully arrived...

Some of us remember... when we were young... our mom or dad may have made marks along the molding in a door frame... and they measured us there... it seemed like we never grew... or would never grow... like we'd always be the same height... but

in fact... we were getting taller... it just happened slowly... imperceptibly... it happened like paint drying... it happened without us knowing how... like the man in today's Gospel... who does not know how the seed grows...

Presbyterian Elder Matt Skinner... who's a Professor at Luther Seminary... wrote... *No other Gospel contains this parable... probably because it's boring... it's plot has all the suspenseful drama of an ordinary elementary-school life sciences textbook... there are no surprises... everything proceeds according to plan... Jesus simply speaks about seeds and what they are supposed to do... they grow and produce... moreover... they grow and produce without your help... or your intricate knowledge of germination or photosynthesis... thank you very much...*

*In other words... the reign of God will... take... root... whether in the world... in imperial society... or in someone's heart... Jesus doesn't specify... it will grow gradually and automatically... it will grow perhaps so subtly that you won't even notice... until at last it produces its intended fruit...*

I want that fruit now... I don't want to wait... I used to think 2,000 years ought to have been enough already for everyone to grow up... but wait I must... because maybe what we're looking at is really a forty or fifty thousand year program... but I wait in faith... that God's will be done...

But that makes it no less tragic... when people take what's political... and make it partisan... when people use the honor / shame code... consciously or unconsciously... to promote agendas that are at odds with God's agenda... when people claim that Republican policies or laws... or Democratic policies or laws... can even come close to God's Laws...

On Thursday... Attorney General Jeff Sessions cited Romans 13 to justify separating infants and children from their parents... regardless of the trauma it's causing...

Romans 13:1 says... *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities... for there is no authority except from God... and those authorities that exist... have been instituted by God...* this statement seems pretty clear... but what he's done is called proof-texting... which is the practice of using out-of-context quotations... to support what one wants to read into the text... instead of seeking to draw out of the overall texts the meanings that the authors intended... for example... just prior to that... in Romans 12:20... Paul wrote... "If your enemies are hungry... feed them... if they are thirsty... give them something to drink... do not be overcome by evil... but overcome evil with good... and Sessions ignored Acts 5:29... when Peter and the apostles said... *We must obey God rather than any human authority...* and in my opinion... he certainly ignored 1John 4:20... *Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen... cannot love God whom they have not seen...*

Using Romans to justify this abusive practice... is not how biblical scholars approach scripture... and is not the way Lutherans or Episcopalians read the Bible... but it is... the same way the Bible has been read to justify slavery... to oppress women... or kill gay men... this is not Gospel... this is not the love that Jesus spoke about... or taught... or stood for... or died for...

Candida Moss... who holds a Chair in Theology at the University of Birmingham... writes... If we want to use the Bible as guide for American government, as Sessions seem to do, then we need to get more specific. This is easy enough in the case of immigration because the issue of migration, the movement of peoples, and care for those away from their homes is one of the most consistently treated topics in the Bible. From the stories about the patriarchs, to the biblical prophets, and Jesus himself, the Bible is insistent that foreigners, strangers, and travelers deserve hospitality and care... and to quote Exodus 23:9: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in Egypt."

And the iconic story of what happens to those who reject outsiders, is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Often erroneously cited in Christian circles as a story about homosexuality, the sin of Sodom is that the people of the town sought to mistreat and abuse outsiders. The punishment? Their behavior is such a breach of the principle of hospitality that God rains down fire upon their heads.

The New Testament is full of similar stories in which Jesus suggests that welcoming outsiders is a basic expectation. When he dispatches his disciples on missionary journeys, he tells them that if they are not welcomed by locals they should shake the dust off their feet when they leave, as a forewarning of the dire punishments those people would receive. Given that both the Hebrew Bible and Jesus have particular concern for the treatment of orphans and children in general, it seems especially strange to suggest that separating families is somehow biblical.

I want the full-on... undiluted... Kingdom of God to be here now... I want the already / not yet... to be the already... I don't want to wait for God's fruit to ripen... but there is my time... and there is God's time... and I don't mean to say that God is holding out on us... I mean to say that we are holding out on God... but things are getting better... yesterday... Grand Rapids held its thirty-first PRIDE celebration... and at the booth we shared with St. Mark's Episcopal Church... we did what we could to convey God's welcome...

But as Professor Skinner continues... The inevitability and mystery of the seed's maturation into a plant... that eventually is harvested... provide a vital counterpoint to the more famous parable that dominates Mark 4... a parable about sowing seeds in various soils... in that parable... so many seeds fail to bear fruit... that one might question God's commitment to seeing the reign of God blossom... and likewise... as the disciples stumble throughout Mark... one might worry that the wrong people have been entrusted with access to divine knowledge... but this simple parable offers a counterbalance and reassurance in the face of such concerns... it is the nature of God's

reign to grow and to manifest itself... that's what it does... as a lamp belongs on a lamp stand... God's reign... like a seed... must grow... even if untended and even if its gradual expansion is nearly impossible to detect...

There's a maxim that I became aware of... after the shootings at Parkland High School... it's said to be a Mexican proverb... but it's also attributed to the Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos... who is believed to have written it... in the early years of the gay rights movement... *They tried to bury us... but they didn't know we were seeds...* And like the mustard seed... we will grow in our capacity to offer shelter... to every tribe and language and people and nation... so they too can find safety... and make homes... in our branches...

Mike+