

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost • June 17, 2018**

**Ezekiel 17:22-24 • Psalm 92 • 2 Corinthians 5:6-10-17 • Mark 4:26-34**

Was Jesus funny? A couple of weeks ago, I came across an essay that asked that question, and it's been rattling around my head ever since. Jesus was fully human, which means he got tired and hungry and sad and angry and everything else. But was he funny, too? To be sure, there's plenty of times in the gospels when Jesus shoots off witty remarks. There's lots of stories where Jesus offers clever commentary. But was Jesus funny?

The answer to that question, let's be honest, is probably, "No." No one laughs when the gospel is read from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. When we read stories about Jesus in Bible study, no one chuckles to themselves. Jesus is nice and Jesus is caring and Jesus is loving but he's really not that funny. And it's really not a problem because if you're the Savior of the world, it doesn't matter how well you can tell a joke. But there's another possibility. Which is that Jesus is funny and we just don't understand his sense of humor. And that actually *is* a problem. Because not only do we miss the joke, but we miss a lot of the message behind it, too.

There are three big reasons why we don't find Jesus all that funny. The first is that humor is bound to a particular culture. Jokes need a certain set of social norms or expectations to play off of, and if you don't get those norms, then the jokes aren't funny. Maybe you've had an experience when you go to another country or even another state, and you realize that you don't "get" the humor. Or, even worse, you make a joke to try to fit in and are met with blank stares. The second is that humor is time bound. So the norms for what's considered funny change over time. If you ever been in a nursing home where they have Turner Classic Movies on all day, then you know this. This movie was considered hilarious when it came out in 1950, but now it's not funny at all. And the third reason we don't think Jesus is funny, this is probably the most important one for us, is that we've all heard the joke too many times. And today's gospel reading where Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God is a prime example of that.

The very first thing Jesus says in St. Mark's gospel is that "the kingdom of God" has come near. That's the kind of thesis statement for his entire mission and life. Now, the kingdom of God is one of those terms that we throw around a lot in church, but it's hard to nail down an exact definition of it. But when Jesus says that the kingdom of God is near, what he's getting at is that God's justice, God's mercy, and God's peace have broken into the world in a radically new way. Namely, they are present in the world through Jesus's life and ministry.

And if the kingdom of God is hard to define, it's even harder to perceive. When Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has come near, many of Jesus's contemporaries surely thought, "I'm really not seeing it. Everything looks pretty much the same as it did before." So Jesus is saying that God is active in the world in a new way, even if it doesn't always appear that way.

This is hard to get your head around. If you are confused by what or where the kingdom of God is, then you're paying attention. That's why Jesus explains it using parables or images. What's the kingdom of God like? "Well, it's kind of like this thing..." And the thing that you compare it to matters.

See Jesus's disciples imagined that when the kingdom of God came, when God restored Israel and creation, it would be this overwhelming experience. In today's first reading, the prophet Ezekiel said that it would be like God taking a little twig up to a high mountain and growing it into a majestic cedar tree. What is the kingdom of God like? It's like a twig that grows to a towering height over all the other trees. It would be so majestic that everyone would know that Israel's God was the true God. The kingdom of God would be impressive, magnificent, extraordinary.

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That's not exactly the way Jesus talks about it. Because when Jesus explains the kingdom of God in today's gospel reading, he does it by telling a joke. The kingdom of God "is like a mustard seed..." Jesus says, "the smallest of all the seeds on earth" that grows into a mustard plant, and, here's the punchline, "the greatest of all shrubs."

See, no one laughed. We've heard this story too many times to really be surprised by it. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed? Of course it is! Everybody knows that. But try to imagine hearing this for the first time. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is like a weed. An invasive plant that grows in places it shouldn't. That springs up seemingly overnight and is so hardy that even Janet Schulz couldn't get rid of it. When Matthew and Luke retell this parable in their gospels they kill the joke by making it about a mustard tree. But it's not a tree, it's a shrub. That's the whole point of the joke. Everyone else wants to talk about the kingdom being like a majestic tree on a mountaintop, and Jesus wants to talk about the weed that you think is impossible annoying.

Mustard bushes covered much of the Galilean countryside where Jesus taught. And if you look at pictures around the Sea of Galilee, there are often little yellow splotches that cover on the hills around it. And those yellow splotches are the flower of the mustard plant that's taken over the hills. The kingdom of God looks like this ordinary shrub that you all are so used to seeing that it's just become invisible to you now.

When we gather around this table every week and pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God's kingdom would come. But if the kingdom of God is a weed that seems to grow on its own, a mustard bush that seems to pop up out of nowhere, then praying for God's kingdom to come seems unnecessary. And it is. In his commentary on the Lord's Prayer, this is how Luther describes that part of the Lord's Prayer: "In fact, God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may come to us." Praying for the kingdom of God to come is sort of like dumping Miracle-Gro on a weed. You can do it, but it's kind of pointless. Because it's going to get plenty big enough even without your chemical enhancement. We're asking instead for the kingdom to come to us. What we're asking when we pray that part of the Lord's Prayer is for the vision to see where the kingdom of God is around us.

So where should you look if you want to see the kingdom of God? Well according to Jesus, don't look up to the heights of the treetops. Don't look to the spires of cathedrals. Look all around you. Look at the things that seem ordinary. And there you'll see the kingdom of God. That requires a change in our vision. A change in the ways we look at and perceive the world. Because we want to judge things in terms of their outward appearance. We assume that something is valuable because it's rare. Or we assume that something is important because of its size. We assume that something can't be important because it's ordinary. And so we cut down the mustard shrubs to see if there's a cedar tree on the other side.

So Jesus is talking about the reality of the kingdom of God as something that comes not when we change our actions but when our perception of the world is changed. And that's a hard message to accept. Because it is way easier to change your actions than it is to change your perception of the world. Because you can exercise some self-awareness and some self-control over your actions. Most of the time, you can evaluate a situation and figure out how to act in a responsible way. But the little voice in your head that gives you a running commentary on the world around you? The little voice that tells you that the problem is always other people and the world does in fact actually revolve around you? That's a hard default setting to break out of.

In today's reading from 2 Corinthians, St. Paul calls that kind of default setting, that little voice in our heads, "a human point of view." And a human point of view does what? It makes superficial judgements. It fits other people into the boxes we make. And Paul says that that's the way

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we used to know Jesus. Right? We thought he had limited potential because he came from some backwater town called Nazareth. His followers weren't well-scrubbed models of respectability. The crowds around him seemed to grow out of nowhere overnight until they were everywhere you looked. They were kind of like the mustard bush that wouldn't stop growing.

But in the light of the resurrection, everything looks different. What we thought was an invasive weed is actually the tree of life. Because living in the light of the resurrection changes how we see things. Paul doesn't have a name for this other point of view, but we might call it a "kingdom point of view." A kingdom point of view sees that God's new creation in the parts of our lives that we have stopped noticing.

A kingdom point of view says that this ordinary bread and wine are a foretaste of God's mercy. A kingdom point of view says that our everyday lives are instruments of God's justice and forgiveness. A kingdom point of view says that our assembly is a sign that points others toward God's unconditional love. And a kingdom point of view says that the mustard bush is a weed, but it's the greatest of shrubs, too.

No joke.

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