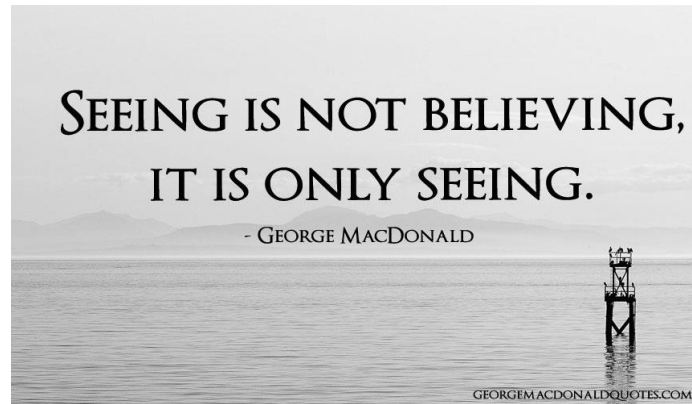


**“Not Seeing is Believing”**  
**A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki**  
**4th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 16, 2024**  
**St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine**



*“Seeing is not as simple as looking” – Joseph Kosuth*

*He who does not see the kingdom of heaven in this life will never see it in the coming life” – Khalil Gibran*

*“The disciples of Jesus said to him, ‘When will the kingdom come?’ Jesus said, ‘It will not come if you look for it. Nor can you say, It is here, or It is there. For the kingdom of the Father is already spread out over the earth, but people don’t see it.” The Gospel of Thomas*

Jesus seems to be saying that before experiencing the hidden power of the Kingdom, we are like fish swimming in the ocean, unaware that we are in water. We are like someone riding on an ox looking for an ox. We are breathing beings, unconscious of the oxygen that surrounds us. We are creatures of God but unaware that the domain of God encompasses the totality of our being. It’s right under our noses—closer than water is to fish, or the ox is to its rider, or the oxygen that fuels the lungs of the one who breathes.

How can we be more aware of this presence of God? How can we see it and, if not see it, experience it? In the epistle today we hear the well-known line which we sang in the hymn of the same name last Sunday, “We walk by faith and not by sight”. God’s presence is experienced by faith and not by the kind of vision that judges based on human standards. Our modern culture is one obsessed by externals — with youth and beauty, accomplishments and credentials, productivity and profit. We are constantly tempted to judge our own worth and that of others according to “a human point of view.” The human

view is describe by David Brooks in his 2015 book, "The Road to Character" where he contrasts two perspectives for living your life — "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues." The former are what you present at a job interview, and what we're all conditioned to seek. But they lead to a shallow life, "self-satisfied moral mediocrity," and "unconscious boredom." Eulogy virtues, on the other hand, are what you hope someone will describe about you at your funeral. Eulogy virtues are those of "inner depth" of character rather than outer accomplishments like wealth or power. Paul reminds us that human standards of judgment count for nothing in God's eyes. The scandal of the cross is that God chooses vulnerability, weakness, suffering, and death in order to bring new life.

In the first lesson today we hear how the Lord is already displeased with the new king, Saul, and urges Samuel to look for a new king. Samuel is drawn to the village of Jesse who assembles his sons, except one, one Jesse deemed not even worthy or important enough to invite – "ahh, he's out there with the smelly sheep". As Samuel invites Jesse to bring by his sons, it is shocking in a culture that always favors the first-born son that Eliab is not selected. In fact all the other six sons are rejected as well and the ruddy one is chosen, this youngster with the skin burnt from being out in the sun too much.

And finally we get to the gospel parable of the mustard seed which is not the kind of crop most people would sow. Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific like a common and sturdy weed. It could pop up almost anywhere and start multiplying. Some of Jesus' listeners must have groaned or chuckled. Mustard grows and is not easily eradicated, takes over inch by inch, and eventually transforms a whole landscape. 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. But this too is a joke: who wants birds taking up residence in their gardens? Birds eat seeds and fruits. They wreak havoc in cornfields. Birds are why farmers put up scarecrows.

But Jesus isn't a scarecrow kind of gardener. Why? Because the kingdom of God is all about welcoming the unwelcome. Sheltering the unwanted. Practicing radical inclusion. The garden of God doesn't exist for itself; it exists to offer nourishment to everyone the world deems unworthy. It exists to attract and to house the very people we'd rather shun. Its primary purpose is hospitality, not productivity.

The parable reminds us that small realizations—even just a germ of a notion—can yield huge results. The story of ninth-grader Elizabeth Cambers illustrates this. She stumbled on an old clipping from "U. S. News and World Report". The story included the line: "Irena Sendler saved 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942–1943." Elizabeth asked her fellow ninthgrader Megan to help her with her project; they pored over the story of Irena Sendler. She learned about how this unassuming young Polish nurse had created thousands

of false identity papers to smuggle Jewish children out of the ghetto. To sneak the children past Nazi guards, Sendler hid them under piles of potatoes and loaded them into gunny sacks. She also wrote out lists of the children's names and buried them in jars, intending to dig them up again after the war so she could tell them their real identities. Imagining themselves in the young nurse's position, these two girls and two other friends wrote a play about Sendler. They called it "Life in a Jar" and performed it at schools and theaters. As word got out, the students' quest to share what Sendler had done appeared on CNN, NPR, and the Today Show. The power of Sendler's story had turned the project into something much bigger than the girls expected.

So to end, let's look at St. Luke's mustard tree. If in this space we don't provide sanctuary, hospitality, sustenance, and renewal to those who need it, like little birds in a field full of foxes, then we aren't preaching or living the gospel. In short, there is no gospel in which Jesus remains buried in the ground like a dormant seed. We don't keep our seeds in the ground. Our buildings, our money, our people are all meant to be used for the sake of the Kingdom. Be a mustard tree glorious in its insignificance and slowly, or maybe not even always slowly, take over the world.