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“Mustard Seed, Cosmic King” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (11/26/2023, Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King)

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Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.

In 2011, a contractor named Brent Loveland showed up to Mike Gundy's house.

Allison, who's Mike Gundy?

Yeah.

Gundy was then, as he still is now, the head coach of the Oklahoma State football team.

We have a representative here with us today.

And so Loveland was shocked when immediately upon his arrival, Coach Gundy started yelling

at him, using a great deal of profanity and saying things like, how dare you come into

my house and insult my wife?

And Brent Loveland was very confused by this.

He said, what in the world are you talking about?

Gundy was furious that Loveland had showed up to his home wearing an OU shirt.

That is, the shirt representing the University of Oklahoma, OSU's Arch Nemesis and Rival.

Loveland was told to pack his things and leave.

Now, it wasn't his intention to troll Coach Gundy that day, but he addressed early in the morning

for the job and the dark, and he just grabbed whatever shirt he had on hand, and it happened

to be that one.

He was dismissed and, of course, sued, and this went on for years in court.

Last week, yesterday, mainly, was rivalry week in college football, and so if you have

any particular allegiances, they most likely had a chance to go on

full display yesterday.

For some people, even mentioning the name of a rival or wearing their clothing is just a bridge too far.

It's a mysterious form of judgment that all of us sports fans or not participate in on a regular basis.

It's a deep, human psychological need to identify with a group, often based on what we perceive to be a tradition or pride in our home area or identification with the kind of talent

that we wish we had, or even in a set of values or characteristics, we think the team

or its leadership has, just as an example.

I have a lifelong affinity for the Chicago Cubs, and when they wrapped up their World Series

run in 2016 with a thrilling Game 7 win, I screamed, I cried, I dropped to the floor.

This was a huge emotional outburst on my part.

I did not grow up in Chicago, I have no ties to the state's Nivellinois.

My judgment on their behalf though is based on a lot of things, probably most deeply on

a childhood connection I have with the Cubs.

They were on WGN every day in the summer, and as a young baseball fan, if I wanted to

watch baseball, that's the team that I watched.

But I've continued to support them because I judge them in other ways too.

They have this cool small neighborhood stadium.

They have a long resistance to change in modernization.

I watched the first night game on TV at Rigglyfield in 1988.

Their fans really make an investment in loving the game of baseball.

I went the only game I've been to at Rigglyfield about 15 years ago.

It was late in the season, typical Cubs season.

They were not doing well, probably 15 games out at that point.

No hope of going to the playoffs.

The stadium was packed to the gills.

Everybody was watching the game.

Everybody was cheering as though this was Game 7 of the World Series.

So I judge them on behalf of those kinds of things.

Judgment, of course, can go both ways, and I and millions of other baseball fans are

still better and angry at the Houston Astros, sorry Lou, for the cheating scandal of 2017.

These things really don't make any rational sense.

And yet, they can form a deep part of our psychology.

Human judgment is real and fickle and often mysterious.

And we do it all the time.

It seems to form early in our lives the tendency to divide the world

and to make judgments.

These are the good people, those are the bad people.

These are the good countries, those are the bad countries.

These are the good political parties, those are the bad political parties.

No matter how much human history has shown us that division and strong identification

with a particular ideology or people group tends to go badly, which it does, we still do it.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, the final story in the church's story that

is about to begin again next week with Advent.

The church marks time differently clearly than the world around us, stubbornly marching

out of step with a secular calendar and clinging to the telling and retelling of one story,

the story of the world's creation and recreation in Jesus Christ, the story of the love of

God that formed the universe and that is planted in every human heart.

That story we will start again next week, it begins in darkness, waiting for new life

to begin, waiting for the light of Christ.

And it ends today with the recognition of Christ as King, the universal monarch raining

over all things and gathering all things unto himself.

Our passage from Ephesians this morning puts it really well.

That God put the same power, the power of God, the power of creation to work in Christ

when He raised them from the dead, Paul says, and seated him at his right hand in the

heavenly places, and God has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all

things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all, who

fills the entire cosmos, the entire universe.

In Christ we are called to hope, we are given a glorious inheritance of God's riches.

We are participants in the same power, the power that raised Jesus from the dead and

exalted Him above every name, every ruler, every ideology, every division.

And so this picture is one of immense universal unity in Christ.

It is difficult, I know, in really nearly impossible these days to imagine a time and a place

in which the deep divisions of our world will cease to exist.

In which every allegiance that we have here will be a distant memory in the fulfillment

of God's dream for the cosmos, but that is the picture that we get on Christ the King's

Sunday.

It is even the picture we receive in Matthew's telling of the final judgment.

We have been walking with Saint Matthew for the past year in the church, listening to him every Sunday, tell and retell the stories and the teachings and the miracles of Jesus.

And if we have been listening what we have received from Matthew is a vision of God's

kingdom, what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven.

And what that kingdom looks like according to Matthew is something tiny, small and insignificant, a mustard seed.

Something tiny, thrown into something large and expansive of field and then something

that produces a safe haven for the birds of the air.

The kingdom begins in smallness and obscurity.

It begins in unexpected ways.

It begins in Nazareth of Galilee, tiny and insignificant.

It is planted and buried in the ground and then it bursts to new life. From the mustard seed it expands to fill the entire cosmos with God's grace.

Now if it were up to us to separate the sheep from the goats, if it were up to us to judge

the world, to decide the criteria upon which the final judgment were based.

If it were up to us to separate the wheat from the tares, if it were up to us to say who's

in and who's out, who's good and who's bad, who's naughty and who's nice, who really

deserves reward and who really deserves punishment, I think you know how that would go.

In this final parable of Jesus, he is simply restating what he has been saying all along.

The kingdom is hidden in plain sight and where humanity wants to look for it is unfortunately

in all the wrong places.

If it were up to us, of course we know what would happen.

The ravages of human history tell the tale.

We would choose based on strength, on power, on good looks, on first impressions, on wealth,

on whatever looks smooth, attractive, new, put together, slick, polished, confident, self-assured.

We would choose based on our perceptions of talent, merit, hard work, gumption, whoever

makes it across the finish line first wins.

The story of the final judgment is good news.

It is good news because it reminds us that we are not in control, thank God.

We do not decide and that our very human criteria for the evaluation of a person's worth

and value are themselves worthless.
It is good news because the kingdom is not for the strong, but for the weak.
Not the powerful, but the powerless.
Not those who put their trust in wealth, not those who work the hardest, not even those who try the hardest, but for those who are failures.
For those who don't measure up.
For those who struggle through life, never quite reaching their goals, never quite matching up.
For those who don't get picked first, in fact, for those who always get picked last.
For those who need a savior.
For those who need to be loved.
For those who are themselves mustard seeds, small and insignificant of little value and worth in the eyes of the world.
That good news is a description of you, and I know it is a description of me.
Remember that those who are rewarded in this parable of the last judgment are not those who self-consciously do good works, calling attention to themselves, looking over their shoulder, always to make sure God is looking.
When the revelation comes of who it is that they have been loving and serving all along, the point is that they never knew who it was.
It is the weeds and the tears and the mustard seed all over again, the kingdom lies hidden in plain sight, buried like a treasure in a field.
So this parable is not a parable about doing good things so that we get a pat on the head at the last judgment.
It is a parable about taking delight and joy in God's judgment, which is for us, for the least, and the lost, and the broken, and the afraid.
Life in the kingdom, life under the reign of Christ, looks like a life of gratitude and joy.
It looks like an openness to the divine prerogative, that is to say, living each day with an eye to discovering God's presence within it, to discovering God's presence in each other and in the world around us.
Look, the rest, we simply do not know.
What we do know is that if we seek, we will find.
What we do know is that if we knock, the door will be opened.
What we do know is that if we ask, it will be given.
What we do know is that it is God's pleasure to give us the kingdom.

And we know these things, not only because they are written in our holy books.

We know these things because they are written on our hearts.

We know because of Matthew's gospel, all the teachings and the parables and the warnings

and the stories we have been hearing now for weeks and weeks and weeks.

Everything that Jesus wants to lay out about how the kingdom of heaven looks and who

it is for.

What about grace, all of its strange and counterintuitive beauty?

All of this is prelude for what comes next, the enacted parable by which Jesus will go to

the cross, the seed that will be buried in the ground, the treasure that will be hidden

in the field, truly hidden, dead, in fact, reduced to nothing.

Jesus teaches us nothing that He Himself does not take upon Himself first.

As our elder brother, our guide, our example, but also our Savior, the risen and exalted one,

our king.

And because of His kingship, He forever redefines power and authority and division and judgments

because His apparent failure on the cross was really the greatest victory of the cosmos,

the victory over sin and death.

And He redefines power and authority because His own body was broken and because it was

broken He can give it away for free, over and over and over again.

And then it becomes a seed planted in each one of us and it grows in the grace and the

love of Christ forever.

Amen.