

Mark 9:30-37
September 19, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A couple weeks ago, Paula and I sat in the courtyard on a Tuesday morning for a moment of short devotion and prayer. She had with her a small mesh-like square container and inside were 4-5 monarch butterflies she had carefully tended to as the once caterpillars transformed themselves into a beautiful butterflies through the miracle of life. These butterflies were ready to be released. As she unzipped one side of the mesh container, slowly they flew out. Their wings fluttering in the air in a sort of rhythmic dance that draws you in and captures your glare. If that were not mesmerizing in and of itself, the shades of orange, yellow and reds upon those wings also keeps your eyes fixated on these magnificent creatures. One butterfly went here, another went there and soon they were all gone. Off to another plant or shrub in a nearby yard. Off gliding through the air for another set of eyes to behold their sheer beauty, if but for a minute or two as we had.

That's how it is at times with God's kingdom in our mortal bodies on earth. The kingdom may be difficult to spot. Yet, it does break in, even if only momentarily we are able to catch a glimpse of it. Jesus has been all about ushering in the kingdom of God. A healing here, a miracle there, an abundant meal to share, stilling a storm calming his disciples fear. His look into what the kingdom of God is like continues today. Like last week, these followers still struggle to grasp it or see it. For all they can still hear most likely is, "The son of man ... will be killed." They cannot yet catch a glimpse of the promise, "he will rise."

Perhaps it's because they are still engulfed in fear, unable to ask him to help them see. Perhaps, it's because their sight is set on what they know or what the world tells them is important. So instead of focusing on the continued teaching of Jesus, they turn on each other and grumble about which one is the greatest. Which one will sit closest to Jesus and thus enter the kingdom first? Which, ultimately, is an image that seems to be the furthest thing away from the kingdom Jesus reveals and teaches as he says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then, to further give life to this teaching, he takes a child and says welcoming one such as this is on par with welcoming Jesus himself and even further, the one who sent him.

We may not grasp the true thrust of this teaching. Children, in antiquity, were essentially a "non-person". Being present among a teacher and his students certainly would have been shocking on its own merit, but then Jesus claiming they bring value to the class must have been inconceivable. Yet, this is what the kingdom is like. This is the portrait Jesus is painting.

There are many glimpses into the kingdom within Mark's gospel account just as there are in the other 3 accounts. Yet, there may be one in this passage often overlooked. It is found in these words:

- "They went on from there..."
- "He was teaching his disciples..."
- "Then they came to Capernaum..."

These few words that may not often get much attention, may not seem important. Yet, they remind us, who we are on the way with. They call us back to who is the one teaching. They recollect the words Jesus said to Peter last week, "Get behind me." We are followers of Christ. And there is more. There is a portrait of the kingdom we see every day. Jesus never let's go. He never leaves our side. These disciples have got it wrong time and time again. Their eyes have failed to see. Their minds cannot grasp who he is. They have been set on themselves and things of the world. They have been equated with Satan. Despite all this, "they went on from there [with Jesus leading]. Despite all this, "he [Jesus] was teaching his disciples." Despite all this, "They [with Jesus] came to Capernaum."

Despite all this... [fill in the blank]. Despite all that gets in our way, times we have failed to welcome the child, times we have not humbled ourselves to be servant of all and least of all, times we have jockeyed for greatness or put ourselves ahead of another brother or sisters, times we have made decisions to meet our own desires without considering the consequences upon the least of those in our midst in which Jesus dwells Despite all this We, too, go on from there...clothed in grace...with Jesus leading us.

We live in the kingdom in which Jesus came to serve and not be served. We live in a kingdom of hope where he became last so we might have life. We live in a kingdom marked by the unconditional love of forgiveness of an abundant God. We live in a kingdom that daily we return to the baptismal font and remember our identity, our value, our worth in the kingdom is not because of name-brand clothing, fancy cars, money, power, or popularity but rather is in the words, "child of God," just as Jesus' identity was marked on the day of his baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved." (Mark 1:11) We come to the table, where all are welcome, all are equal, are fed with the same bread and the same cup, all share in the banquet that has no end ... and while not present for this physical meal, all you that are present online, perhaps not ready or able to join us yet in person, working multiple jobs to pay medical expenses of a loved one, sitting at the bedside of a dying parent, dealing with an illness yourself, exhausted from your labors or simply sipping your coffee on your couch, singing praise to our Lord, and giving glory and thanks for a new day ... you receive the same words of Jesus we do ... your presence is felt and together we share in the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. If only momentarily, we catch a glimpse of what it is and will be when Jesus comes again.

These words, reminders that Jesus continued on the way and continued to teach are images of resurrection. For even when we falter ... Jesus offers forgiveness. He cleanses us from our sin. He restores us to new life. He picks us up, dusts us off and leads us on the way to be his people, to do his work, to be vessels of hope, love, joy, light, and life in this wonderful world God created and so, so loves. It is through the cross and resurrection we have been given eyes to see this kingdom and it is through the Holy Spirit we are reminded we too, are beautiful, glorious, magnificent butterflies blowing in the wind and through Christ that dwells in us helping the world see a portrait of the inbreaking kingdom of God.