

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost – Keli Pennington

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

Perception is reality. This is something we would talk about often in my public relations courses in college. The funny thing is, when people use that phrase, they are almost always using it to say that the perception is incorrect and leads to a false sense of reality. Perception can be deceiving. We are just looking and not fully seeing. The more I thought about this phrase, though, I realized that it's actually not always the perception itself that's the problem. The issue tends to be the over-arching belief or tendency that lies behind it. Each of us has a "default setting" that we operate out of without even thinking about it; it creates our expectations for ourselves and the world around us and, therefore, informs our perceptions.

For instance ... well, before I go into my for-instance, let me preface this by saying how much I love my grandma and how I don't have much room to talk about her being a worry-wart because I absolutely fall into that category too, but ... my grandma is president of the worry-warts society. When I was in maybe 3rd grade or so, my grandma took my brother and me out for lunch to a little greasy spoon called the Hog Trough in the tiny farm town by our house. While eating our lunch, there was this loud bang immediately followed by shattering glass. My grandma lunged across the table in attempt to shield my brother and me. After we all regained our bearings a few moments later, one of the waitresses explained that someone had accidentally run into the building with their car, hence the bang, and then the impact forced a table away from the wall and caused the glass salt and pepper shakers to fall off the table and break, explaining that noise. While the situation was definitely odd, it was easily explained. After everything had calmed down, I asked my grandma why she lunged to cover us. She responded that she thought a bomb had gone off. Even at that age, I knew that, logically, the chances of someone wanting to set a bomb in a town of 1,000 people in the middle of Illinois at the little hole-in-the-wall (called the Hog Trough, mind you) made no sense. Perception was definitely not reality. But the problem was not the perception, but rather the worry-wart mentality that was informing it. While everyone might not operate from a worry-wart mentality like my grandma and I do, we all have a default perspective, a status quo of sorts, that is informing each perception we make.

Our scripture passages today remind us that looking is not the same as seeing and that our perceptions are not the same as God's reality. I want to discuss some of the perceptions the scriptures give us and how it helps us gain a better understanding of God's reality, and ultimately, how we can move away from our default status quo mentality and instead move to a Kingdom vision mindset.

In our Old Testament passage today, when Samuel goes to Jesse to select one of his sons to be king, he starts by operating from his default, status quo mindset—which, let me point out, is comforting and comical. Comforting, that a person so connected to the reality of God, like Samuel, doesn't always follow through on that perfectly, giving us room for failure too, as well as comical, since the status quo for a king as seen in Saul clearly worked out so well. But I digress ... Samuel follows the status quo in his patriarchal society and immediately looks to the oldest son to be selected as the next king, and thinks, "Perfect, God made this so easy for me. He put the right son of Jesse right in front! Yeah, he looks like a king." But God says, "Oh no.

Things aren't what they appear. I'm not just **looking** at a person's appearance or stature or birth order; I can **see** their heart." And so, the story goes that God chooses the youngest, the one that perpetually drew the short straw and had to stay out with those pesky sheep. The one that wasn't even supposed to be at the sacrifice with Samuel and his family. This was the king that would have a heart that was so aligned with God's reality that we say he's a man after God's own heart. God had to break through a status-quo mindset to break down Samuel's perceptions so that God's reality could be fully realized. This passage reminds us that the first step towards God's reality is recognizing that things aren't always as they appear and aren't always as expected, so without an intimacy with God, we can miss out on seeing as he does.

When we look to our Gospel passage today, we see two parables interwoven to help us try to grasp what the Kingdom of God is like. I don't know about you, but my first perception of the Kingdom of God is an ethereal, powerful, orderly, beautiful vision of gleaming perfection. But when Jesus sets reality straight for us, it's compared to a passive farmer that throws the seeds into the dirt and then just watches until it's time to gather the harvest. Apparently, the Kingdom of God isn't orderly, like my type-A self had hoped. He goes on to compare it to a tiny, insignificant mustard seed and then to a weed of a plant. This isn't as exciting as we maybe had pictured, and if you're more of a ketchup person like me, that adds to the disappointment. While my description of the parables is hyperbolic, our initial perception of these items does not really match the usual description for the Kingdom of God. What is Jesus seeing that we're not? What default setting am I operating out of that is causing me to miss out on seeing the Kingdom of God that Jesus describes?

These parables are so necessary for us to get a better grasp of what God's reign in the Kingdom looks like because if you were to describe the Kingdom like I just did, or even if Jesus were to say flat out what the heart of the parable is trying to get at, we probably wouldn't believe it or want to take part in it. These parables force our perceptions in a different direction. They make us consider, what if the Kingdom of God is as unassuming as a tiny seed, or as inconvenient as a large weed, or a place for any creature to find protection and comfort, or something that will spring up on its own without our help, but yet is still for us to participate in. This Kingdom doesn't seem like the grand heavenly and distant one that I grew up imagining, but rather one that is ordinary and tangible.

I have slowly been reading through The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard over the last few months, and this has radically reoriented my life and way of viewing the Kingdom. First, it's important to first establish that God's Kingdom is referring to the range of his will. While we may be tempted to subject the influence and reality of God to our heart, it goes far beyond that. While God looks at our hearts, like he did when selecting David as king, the Kingdom isn't limited to our hearts. This Kingdom is very physically present. Jesus' physical presence on earth reminds us of the immediacy of the Kingdom, but Jesus's presence also wasn't the start of the Kingdom. Willard posits that the Gospel of Christ brought a new accessibility, a new availability, in which we can interact with the Kingdom. So when Jesus taught us to pray *Thy kingdom come* we are not asking for its existence but for it to take over our daily lives, our reality. As Paul writes in our 2nd Corinthians passage, Christ's life and death has changed everything and has flipped it on its head. What seems to be a dim ordinary reality can be fundamentally changed,

revitalized, and realized through the power and love of Christ. We have the opportunity to peel back the stuff of daily life and to step into the Kingdom of God

As I've read through Willard, I am reminded that the eternal Kingdom is happening right now. God is influencing the world around me, and I have the choice to operate from a Kingdom mentality that allows me to perceive God's work in the world as he makes all things new and inform my reality to have it align with God's, or I can just stick with my default, status quo mentality and go about my daily life just looking at things, not seeing them. To break away from the default, and into Kingdom vision, we must establish ourselves in an intimate relationship with God. When we know God, we see God. When we step into God's reality, we see things as they are before God. The things of this world become new, just as our 2nd Corinthians passage reminds us. This applies to all situations and all people. When our default setting has reset to the kingdom vision, our perceptions are altered and our reality aligns with God's. This is what Willard describes as the "irresistible reality of the kingdom" where we "become at home in God's world."

To be at home in God's irresistible world is where *on earth as it is in heaven* simply becomes "on earth, where we are with God." My prayer is that each of us find ways to peel back that default, status quo setting we try to live our daily lives in and to step into the freedom of the Kingdom of God where we can see every element, every seed, every weed, every person, just as God does, along side God.