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## *Are We "New Creations" Yet? ...Hmm?*

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The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, GA  
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Invocation: In the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend! Amen.

"You might as well face it," our retreat leader told us. That got our attention. So we're all listening carefully in our rows of chairs at one of our clergy conferences a few years ago. This is the all-clergy conference that Bishop Alexander convenes every year at our camp and conference center here in the Diocese of Atlanta: Camp Mikell.

The speaker continued: "I had to learn this myself. I had to realize that we're just not going to get a roomful of Episcopalians to shout, "Amen!" when we make a significant point. So if you think you're really inspired when you state some gospel truth, prepare yourself for the following response. This is how you'll know, if you're looking for some kind of verbal feedback. You'll know you've made an impact on your fellow Episcopalians when you can hear them say, "Hmm." Yes, that's right, "Hmm." Not, "Amen!" but "Hmm." Just like that. Imagine you're seeing it in print. No exclamation marks or bold letters. Just a solid but very polite, "Hmm" in the room.

So I ask you now, in this room full of Episcopalians, was he right? Hmm? Now there's a different tone for you. "Hmm?" with a question mark. Was he right, I ask you? Now, maybe some of us would respond with yet another tone, accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders: "Hm, maybe. Maybe he's right. Hm." Okay. We'll leave it there. Just check-it out next time you get a chance to notice. Who knows? Something like this might happen during a sermon like this one, even here at the Cathedral . . . "Hmm?" . . . or, "Hmm."

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So now, how about that "gospel truth?" Today's scriptures are full of them. Here's just one that stands out in our gospel reading. Actually, as we've just heard, today's gospel offers two parables. But I feel inspired to treat them as one gospel truth from the perspective of this gospel according to Mark. In the first parable, Jesus said:

"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground . . . and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself . . . [Then] when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mk. 4.26-29)

"The earth produces of itself" (the word in Greek is "automatically"), and the sower "knows not how." Mysteriously, behind his back as it were, while he sleeps and rises day and night the seeds begin to germinate and fructify on their own. And so magically it seems, all the sower sees is "first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."

Precisely here we can combine this first parable with the second that is like it:

"The kingdom of God . . . is like a mustard seed . . . the smallest of all the seeds . . . yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs . . ." (Mk. 4.30-32)

Now the common feature of these parables is that the kingdom of God comes in ways that we do not know or understand. On the one hand it appears to emerge automatically and on the other hand more abundantly than anyone could expect

based on our own knowledge and efforts. So keep those two aspects of one gospel truth in mind: (1) the kingdom of God comes mysteriously as if it had a life of its own—we know not how; and (2) the kingdom of God comes abundantly, far beyond what we expected to see or experience. Mysteriously on the one hand, abundantly on the other.

Consider this example, perhaps the most formative event in Christian history after our Lord's own death and resurrection. It has both mystery on the one hand and abundance on the other. To get the full impact you have to imagine the growing astonishment of Christians in the fourth century; in the decades immediately following the year 311. Overnight—almost literally overnight—after three centuries of routine torture and martyrdom, the Roman emperor Constantine ended the persecution of the churches. Thus began our transformation from a despised sect to our central role in the growth of the Holy Roman Empire, otherwise known as Christendom. And thus Christianity grew from its 1st century origin as a tiny Jewish minority to become the largest religion in the world today, comprising as much as one-third of the world's population.

So precisely here we might connect with today's parables. "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground . . . and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." Now we do not need to identify Christendom with the "kingdom of God." And we can certainly explain the emergence of Christendom, as many historical accounts do, in terms of Constantine's imperial ambitions and the politics of empire. Nonetheless it is also true, according to that classical proverb, that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church;" to repeat—that the proliferation of Christianity in its first three centuries throughout the Roman Empire was a case of "the blood of the martyrs being the seed of the Church."

For precisely as a small seed—that is, a persecuted minority—Christianity became "the greatest of all growths," as Jesus says in the parable. Continuing beyond the 4th century this abundance still "counts" as a key fulfillment of our Lord's parable. It remains a clear example of something initially insignificant becoming more abundant than anyone could have expected based on its humble origins. It remains a key example of mystery and abundance.  
Hmm.

Now, time fails me to recount numerous other cases of this gospel truth. We could begin for, example, with the patriarchal story of God's promise to Abraham in the book of Genesis. Recall that from this man's small family it was prophesied that his descendents would be "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen. 22.17, 26.4). The sequel to that story occurs in the second book of the Bible, in Exodus. Indeed, Exodus is the prototype—the first case—of our own Christian story of deliverance from persecution. For Exodus features the key historical event of our sister tradition, Judaism. It's the escape of a motley tribe of Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt; from bondage and persecution. It's also true that this obscure and mysterious historical event is undocumented among other sources of world history. But it is also unrefuted. So today we are all witnesses to this abundant growth of Judaism as one of the world religions.

Hmm.

And consider the mysterious repetition of that Exodus story in African American history in these United States. Now we don't need to identify the kingdom of God with either Judaism or the black church. But we can still marvel at the abundant vigor and vitality of these two communities. Is that abundance mysteriously related somehow to their shared experience of emancipation?—related to emancipation not as sheer historical fact but to emancipation as a form of divine intervention—as an act of God?

Hmm?

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Again, time fails for recounting such arresting examples. But why do we need to look backwards to find today's parables fulfilled in human experience? Why not consult our own lives; the lives of many of us sitting here in this room today?

As God is our witness, we too have had our key experiences of mysterious growth from small beginnings to abundance and vitality. We too have had our "exodus" experiences from persecution and bondage to security and freedom. Our lives too

are fulfillments of today's two parables and of their combined gospel truth.

How many of us have been metaphorically a minor or a minority among our peers" as David was depicted in today's Old Testament reading? (1 Sam. 15.34-16.13). Or how have we been otherwise discounted in some way, but subsequently emerged with the Lord's favor on us, as if we were specially anointed and preferred? Hmm?

And how many of us have experienced the kingdom of God becoming real among us in the form of an unexpected healing of a disease or a distress? For how many of us is the kingdom becoming real in our unlikely recovery from an addiction or some former or recent mistake? Hmm?

And how many of us are enjoying a career, or a relationship, or some other development in life that providentially took us by surprise and carried us beyond what we could have humanly expected from our own knowledge and efforts? Hmm?

And finally, as St. Paul declares in today's epistle reading, for how many of us is it true that "from now on we regard no one from simply a human point of view,' not even ourselves? Instead, how many of us affirm" also about ourselves" that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new?" (2 Cor. 5.17) Hmm?

Well, sisters and brothers in Christ, if any of these gospel truths are true for us then, indeed, the kingdom of God has become real here in this community. And in that connection recall with me now our opening prayer, our Collect appointed for today, where we are named the "household of the Lord.'

In the words of the Collect let us continue as the "household of the Lord,' in steadfast faith and love. And through such grace may we continue to proclaim with boldness this gospel truth" the truth of God's mysterious but evident abundance, living and active among us today. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen!

[www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html)

(Sizes shown are approximate estimates, for the purpose of ordering the groups)

Christianity: 2.1 billion  
Islam: 1.5 billion  
Secular/Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist: 1.1 billion  
Hinduism: 900 million  
Chinese traditional religion: 394 million  
Buddhism: 376 million  
primal-indigenous: 300 million  
African Traditional & Diasporic: 100 million  
Sikhism: 23 million  
Juche: 19 million  
Spiritism: 15 million  
Judaism: 14 million  
Baha'i: 7 million  
Jainism: 4.2 million  
Cao Dai: 4 million  
Zoroastrianism: 2.6 million  
Tenrikyo: 2 million  
Neo-Paganism: 1 million  
Unitarian-Universalism: 800 thousand  
Rastafarianism: 600 thousand  
Scientology: 500 thousand

Data above from source: [www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html) accessed by Prof. Thee Smith, Emory University, 6/13/09.

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