

Seeds and Weeds

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 7, 2011.
The Third Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Ezekiel 17:22-24 and Mark 4:26-34.*

On June 15th, over 60 years ago, my parents were married on a day so hot that the rice thrown by the guests stuck to my father's already balding head. On June 16th over 100 years ago, my mother's mother was born. With these significant dates and with today being Father's Day, I have been thinking a lot this weekend about my parents and my grandmother, remembering them and—truth be told—missing them.

I would have been thinking about them anyway, as I reflected this week on these readings about trees and seeds. Both Dad and Nana, as we called my grandmother, loved trees and flowers and gardening. They landscaped and planted and gardened happily together for many years. They enjoyed both companionship and their shared work of planning the garden and flower beds, preparing the soil, scattering the seed, planting bulbs or setting out the young plants, watering, fertilizing, defending against pests. I'm not sure they enjoyed weeding, but they did it. And boy, did we all enjoy their harvest! My mother did not share their interest in gardening, but Mom was a wizard in the kitchen. I can still remember—and almost taste—the fresh strawberries, the tomatoes, okra (which I learned to like as an adult), squash, beans, even cantaloupes and watermelons.

I did inherit the gardening gene, but living in Manhattan without even a terrace has made it go dormant . . . for now. My own love of trees and flowers and growing things gets expressed in roaming around Central Park every week, or even daily when I can. I love—and somehow need—to take in the progress of the seasons by watching the growing things. The stark tree trunks of bleak midwinter give way to the first crocus of spring, then the yellow riot of forsythia, then tulips in every color. The grass greens and the trees bud and flower in clouds of pink and white. Right now the Park is lush with the fresh greens and scents of early summer. The Conservatory Garden flowerbeds change color and shape every week like a kaleidoscope. By August the trees will be a darker green, a bit tired and dusty. Then the leaves will change to brilliant colors (we hope) before falling and blowing in the dry brown swirls of early winter.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.

Jesus is teaching in parables. Parables are more than just little stories about everyday things like seeds, bread, working in the vineyard, prodigal children, and wedding banquets. Parables are deceptively simple stories that have a fishhook in the middle of them. They may sound innocuous on the surface, but they are meant to mess with our heads, to challenge our assumptions, to disturb our worldview. They invite us in. If we understand them, we get “hooked” and challenged to change in some way. We are always free to accept the challenge and act on it, or at least wrestle with it; we are also free to walk away.

Parables are kind of like jokes. Some of us get the joke and laugh out loud. Some of us don't get the joke because we don't understand it. Some people understand the parables - some get them, and some don't. Which is why I think Jesus was explaining everything in private to his disciples. Sounds to me like his disciples didn't “get” it (a fact that always gives me comfort). I think Jesus was trying to help them understand, to get “hooked” into understanding, so they could be challenged themselves and then share what they'd learned with others.

Both these parables seem to be about seeds growing, but seeds are only the illustration. The parables are really about the kingdom of God. The disciples understand seeds, but what are their assumptions about the Kingdom of God? We understand seeds, even if we are NYC urban dwellers whose feet may not touch actual earth for months. What are our assumptions about the Kingdom of God? When we pray, as we do every time we gather here, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, what Kingdom is it we are praying for?

The disciples, and likely most of the crowds Jesus was teaching, would have understood “kingdom” viscerally, rather than intellectually like we do, because they lived in one: the kingdom of Herod, the kingdom of Rome. A kingdom with a ruler to whom allegiance was owed. These kingdoms were systems of domination and oppression, of exploitation enforced by power and violence. They were characterized by poverty, misery, malnourishment, wars, and desperation. [*Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Mark*, Marcus J. Borg, 2009, pp. 29-30.]

Yes, those listening to Jesus knew about kingdom.

Then what would they have understood the “kingdom of God” to be? Surely something very different. They yearned for a kingdom where people lived in peace. Where every family had its own vine and fig tree, their daily

bread—enough to sustain them. Where God’s rule meant justice and peace, so that no one needed to be afraid. They dreamed of a different kind of world here on earth. And they wanted it soon.

When it came, the kingdom of God would surely be like the largest tree in the land, planted on the highest mountain. The symbol for the ancient kingdom of Egypt had been the mighty cedar of Lebanon—not quite as large as our redwoods, but you get the idea. Jesus’ audience would have grown up knowing this vision written by the prophet Ezekiel from the midst of the Babylonian exile, surely a sign of hope in a hopeless time: God planting a new cedar sprig on a high mountain, so that it grows into a noble cedar, tall and strong and sheltering all kinds of creatures.

That tall cedar would be the restored kingdom of Israel, when the long-awaited Messiah came. The Messiah who would surely be born in the Jerusalem royal court, who would surely ride into Jerusalem in a fine chariot drawn by six splendid horses, who would vanquish the Roman oppressors and drive them out.

But Jesus says the kingdom of God is “like a mustard seed, which when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

A few people in the crowd probably laughed out loud when they heard that. Others shook their heads—no wonder people said this guy was out of his mind. The greatest of all *shrubs? Mustard?* The joke here isn’t about a small seed growing into something large; there’s nothing unusual about that. The joke here is *mustard*. Anybody know anything about mustard? Mustard is a weed. A very beautiful weed, at least here in our country: fluorescent yellow growing between the rows grapevines in Sonoma. But it’s short and scrubby, with branches that no self-respecting bird would build a nest in. The kingdom of God is like a **weed**—like dandelions, like crabgrass, like kudzu in the South, like sagebrush out West. The kingdom of God is fleeting; it’s an annual, not a perennial.

The kingdom of God is also like someone scattering seed on the ground, and the seed spouts and grows, he does not know how; the earth produces of itself. And when the grain is ripe, he goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come.

The kingdom of God grows in a hidden, mysterious way, independently of human effort. Growth is the miraculous work of God, and the harvest is both gift and miracle. This is a parable to remember whenever we take ourselves and our efforts too seriously, whenever we try by our plans and our programming efforts to bring about “the kingdom of God.” By reminding us of God’s hidden presence and power, this little parable disturbs our arrogance and self-importance.

So does that mean we can just sit back and wait for God to take care of everything? I don’t think so. We have our jobs to do: to scatter seed on the ground, perhaps do what we can, like fertilize and water. We need to be watchful, actually noticing what’s growing, and be ready to participate in the harvest when the time is right. We have our jobs to do. God’s “job” is to create the natural growth. Even with all our scientific advancements, we can’t do that.

The Abundant Life Garden Project has started here at St. Bart’s. The Sunday School—and all of us are invited, too—are spending the summer learning about creation and our stewardship of it. They have planted seeds, and they have set out plants for a container garden. (The garden will be on the third-floor terrace as soon as the construction there is finished. For now it’s right out there in the cloister garden—take a look after the service.)

The children will water and take care of the garden this summer. They will harvest the herbs and vegetables when it is time, and they will give the harvest to our pantry and soup kitchen. But even with all their work, they can’t make those seeds and herbs and vegetables grow. That’s what God is doing.

We are also making plans now to launch small groups here this fall. We are preparing the ground and scattering seed. We will water and tend this particular garden, and we’ll be ready to help with the harvest, whatever that may be. But the growth of those groups—what happens in people’s hearts—is entirely up to God.

In Mark’s Gospel, the first words Jesus speaks as he comes to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, are these: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” Believe, meaning: Give your heart to. Commit yourself to God and God’s kingdom and its vision of a very different kind of world. Repent, meaning “Go beyond the mind that you have,” the mind that is shaped by culture and convention. Jesus is sowing seeds of the kingdom of God—a very different kind of world here on earth, right now. [Borg, 31.]

The kingdom of God is as tough and persistent and pervasive as a weed, growing back every year. Growing back after the devastation of the forest fires and tsunamis in our own lives. Growing up through the cracks in the asphalt of tragedies and the concrete of our hardness of heart. Growing over and around and through the walls we build to divide and separate ourselves from each other.

Look around. Where do you see the kingdom of God growing like a weed? What seeds are you scattering?
Amen.

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