

North Shore Congregational Church

Located in Fox Point, WI

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Seeds and Weeds Out of Control

Scripture Readings-Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4: 26-34

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Our first reading comes from the prophet Ezekiel and is set in a period of political jockeying for Israel. The King, Zedekiah has made a deal with Egypt in rebellion against Babylon under whom Israel had been held and sent into exile. But now Israel has been again taken over by a foreign power. The verses you will hear put a framework around these foolish actions of the king, claiming that God is the one who will provide, God is the one who will cause the “branch” to prosper, to be shade, to flourish the people. Listen for God’s word spoken through the prophet Ezekiel chapter 17 verses 22- 24.

Ezekiel 17:22-24

22Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. 24All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Our second reading is from Mark’s gospel and is in the midst of Jesus teaching about the mystery of the kingdom of God through a series of parables. Listen for God’s word in two of these parables in Mark chapter 4 verses 26-34.

Mark 4: 26-34

26He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

30He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet 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.”

33With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Let us pray-Creating and Gracious God, deepen the way we listen for the in breaking of the Kingdom of God through the many ways you speak to us this morning. Amen

Seeds and Weeds Out of Control

Here we are in the parables of Jesus again. These parables of seeds and growing seem well placed as we begin our own season of growing not only for the gardens we plant but for the church that we belong to.

Some of you may know that I will be gone from July 11th through the 18th as I am the director of MiniKamp which is part of the Wisconsin Congregational Association's state wide camp for children and youth. Well I have been working on the program, or lessons we will teach and on the first day we are spending time with some of Jesus' parables, talking about how Jesus used stories to teach or make a point. I think we all do this don't we? I know I do, it is often helpful to take some kind of real life everyday occurrence and connect it, or use it to illustrate something about the truth of the Gospel. But usually the truth is so much deeper than the story. The truth that is given through these parables are not simple sweet lessons that we can file away in order to bring them out for the next teachable moment, especially the ones that Jesus tells in order to describe the Kingdom of God.

Under and through the everyday image of growing a garden is a reality that is meant to change us and turn what we thought we knew into something that grasps us and takes us more deeply into...love. It is a reminder I myself need, to look beyond the necessary things of the everyday and open myself up to the deeper desires God is speaking through the everyday, to submit myself to the invasive, and unimagined movement of God's kingdom, God's love, God's intention.

When Jesus uses the mustard seed as a tool for his parable he is introducing a study of contrast and the unexpected. And even for the first followers that heard the parable this was not a simple agricultural tale which equated the promise of God's kingdom with a comforting shade tree. Nor was the mustard seed a plant that anyone in that time would wish to cultivate because it all too easily overtook everything else.

Natural History a document written about the same time as the gospels records that while mustard is "extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild ... when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once."

So what they may have heard is that the Kingdom of God was immediate, persistent and out of control, and you can imagine for some this made it undesirable. Perhaps that is a problem for us as well. We thrive on structure and order don't we? We like to solve problems and are usually not very comfortable with ambiguity.

How many of you like to read or watch a good mystery? I know I do, but I will confess I like to get to the end to find out what the answer was, and better yet I love it when I have figured out who "done it" along the way beating the author to the solution of the mystery.

I think for many of us the persistence of a weed is a bit of a mystery isn't it? I mean we do a combination of pulling and spraying and digging to get at the root of the weed, but they seem to keep coming back. And if you let yourself, you realize there is something rather miraculous about them really.

Have you ever been driving in a bit of open country and your breath is taken away by a field of yellow and you realize they are... dandelions? God's kingdom is like a dandelion perhaps, breaking into our yards and fields. Surprising us and taking our breath away by the sheer fact that it is here and we don't really understand how this happened or fully what it means

or even what we are to do about it, but it is stunningly beautiful if we are willing to accept it as so.

It is intrinsic to our faith that we understand that this kingdom of God that Jesus describes through story is a gift! It is not something we can somehow orchestrate or engineer. The growth of the kingdom is not something we can make happen if we just follow the best church growth plan that is currently marketed. It is something we accept and give in to. It is God's and it is clear that God's intention is to share it with us. The first little parable does make this point very clearly, it is God's church growth plan not ours.

But if we imagine ourselves as participants in this parable of seeds and weeds out of control, we are there sleeping and rising night and day, living life in the midst of unwarranted and sometimes unacknowledged growth.

And this does not mean that we don't participate in this Kingdom of God, nor does it mean that any visioning and planning with long term goals for nurture and growth are futile. We are by nature planners. We have calendars and programs and forms that help us keep track, and to do lists that keep us going forward in an organized manner. And we worry about the number of people sitting in the pews or taking part in whatever programs are offered or volunteering to make things happen. But the crazy uncomfortable thing for us is, that God is not dependent on whatever church growth strategy we may have in mind, we are dependent on God...and we need to remember this!

So don't forget the radical nature of the parables we read today. They tell us we must open ourselves up to the concept of God's kingdom as seeds and weeds out of control, and that we are already growing in so many ways that our number counting and "to do" lists can ever describe.

So even as we celebrate the distinct and beautiful way that God moves us through scripture and words and music, even as we sink into the summer "schedule" - practice the difficult task of allowing God's kingdom to break into your day, your life, your family. What are you waiting for? Amen.

Let's sing Hymn All Things Bright and Beautiful

Refrain:

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful:
The Lord God made them all.

Each little flow'r that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colors,
He made their tiny wings.

The purple-headed mountains,
The river running by,
The sunset and the morning
That brightens up the sky.

The cold wind in the winter,
The pleasant summer sun,
The ripe fruits in the garden,
He made them every one.

God gave us eyes to see them,
And lips that we might tell
How great is God Almighty,
Who has made all things well.

Invocation and the Lord's Prayer

Gracious God, we gather here to worship You with hearts that are glad and grateful because you move in our spirit so simply and clearly as you speak to us through music, Your word, through story and through our prayers. Sometimes what seems simple confounds us and we need to listen more deeply. So as we worship we also ask that you teach us to pray in the way you teach your disciples to pray saying, Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Concerns of the Church and Morning Prayer

We have both joys and cares to share this morning. The joy of sharing in the music ministry of this church as well as the blessing of Rick sharing his gifts with this church for more than 25 years. We also share Joy in the birth of Su Davison's new Grandchild Charlotte Grace. I too wish to mention the great joy of my very good friend Laura's ordination today. Many of our families are celebrating the graduation of their children, from middle school, high school and college. Yesterday Patt Krecji and Bob Dallman were married here- we pray joy for them as well.

Please do keep Ron and Laurie Shawger in your prayers for encouragement and comfort as well as Gisela Kuist as she recovers from hip surgery.

Are there other joys and concerns?

Loving God - Planter of Seeds,

We share our joys and concerns with each other here knowing that your love and care are already present. We pray that we may be open to and participate in the kingdom that you promise and bring in surprising and unexpected ways...and we are grateful for all that you provide.

- We take a moment to offer our silent joys and prayers to you now...
- For those that feel tiny or insignificant like a mustard seed, assure them of how beloved they are...
- For those whose worry and fear constrict their hearts...make them free and confident in your guidance.
- For those who are hurt or ill, bring healing as only you can
- And for those who grieve any and every kind of loss, fill them with your presence.
- Lord, quicken our senses to Your kingdom come and cause us to be part of its movement in the world today. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Let us continue our worship today with our offerings and gifts.

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