

Third Sunday after Pentecost 13 June 2021

Ezekiel 17:22-24 / Psalm 92 / 2 Corinthians 5:6-17

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Welcome to our continued celebration of First Communion, as Liana, Christian and Christopher come to the Lord's Table today for the first time to share the sacraments. And we have wonderful readings today, showing various forms of the tree of life, and how that tree is with us at worship: in the cross that we gather around, and as the tree into which we are all grafted through baptism. And, the tree of life is the true vine, nourishing us at the table in the cup we share in community.

And while a mustard shrub may not be what we expect God's activity to look like, or seem that impressive, it grows with a power beyond our understanding, in amazing and unexpected ways.

We heard Jesus telling two parables in our Gospel reading from Saint Mark. Two of them, because they're short and each packs a punch. Now, parables teach us something, but they're not really a morality story like, say, *Aesop's Fables*.

Remember "The Tortoise and the Hare" (slow and steady effort pays off) or "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" (honesty is the best policy)? That's not what we have here.

Parables are more useful when what you want to share may be difficult to hear, or understand, or to believe. Minister and theologian Eugene Peterson calls parables “narrative time bombs,” meant to undermine our assumptions of things we accept without question, and offer us a vision of something different. You may hear them - tick - wonder about them - tick - think you probably understand - tick - as you walk away - tick - and then - tick - all the sudden the truth Jesus wanted to show you hits home - boom!

The first parable we heard, about the sower scattering seed on the ground, sounds like it might be about faith, or the need to be ready. Or, it might really be about our inability to control the coming kingdom of heaven, to decide whether we or other people believe. And that’s an uncomfortable reading, because it leaves us vulnerable. God’s kingdom comes, completely apart from our effort. It can’t be controlled, or influenced, and it can only be received as a gift.

In this sense faith may be like falling in love, not something we make a decision about. Kingdom-of-God faith, like love, is something that comes from the outside and grabs hold of you, whether you want it to or not.

And it's mysterious. Some of us may remember growing seeds for the first time in elementary school, or with our children or grandchildren. You place a bean or a nasturtium or other large seed in a little cup filled with soil, wait a few days and watch.. And poof, like magic it turns into something else: a green thing that's living, growing, maybe even spreading across the ground. There's a mystery revealed: the seed unfolds by its own operation. It grows on God's timetable, not yours or mine.

The second parable Jesus tells may show us another difficult truth. It might be about how God can grow small things, like a mustard seed, into grand ones. Or, just maybe it's really about how the kingdom can and will penetrate and take over our lives, sometimes against our better judgment.

Do any of you have gardens? Right now I've got a terrace at my house, but in Brooklyn for many years I had a backyard garden. And, you know how we plan to grow certain plants? And it looks great? And how then sometimes other plants creep in? Wherever we may live, there's always something no one plants because it can take over and just grow uncontrollably. Here it might be wild grape vines or ivy; and down South, kudzu; or in the Near East in Jesus' time, it was mustard.

And Jesus says the kingdom of God is like that! Mustard wasn't a flowering shrub someone might plant as an accent on their property, a nice forsythia or lilac, an azalea or rhododendron. Mustard was more an invasive weed, something you'd want to keep out of the garden because it gets out of hand and can just run amok.

The seeds of the new kingdom may not look like we would expect, or hope. If God's kingdom were sold in a box at Lowe's or Target, it would probably have a warning: use only in moderation. But that's the thing, the kingdom isn't a commodity to be bought or sold, to be used diligently but carefully. It is a new reality that invades, and overturns, and eventually overcomes our old reality. It creates hope and expectations, leads people to change their jobs to share it, and to leave behind their old ways to live into it. The kingdom is dangerous! You just don't know where it will take you, or what you'll do when it seizes hold of you.

In Wednesday Bible study we're looking at Jonah, a prophet who couldn't believe God wanted him to try and save people he hated. He so couldn't believe it that he left town rather than do what God asked, and ended up in a transformative situation that involved the belly of a large fish. In modern times, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about having been on a life path that had nothing to do with

religion, or God, and then experiencing God picking her up and putting her on another life path that ended up involving recovery from substance abuse, finding religion, being called to ordained ministry, and becoming a noted pastor, author and public speaker. She describes it as a disruptive and painful experience, that most definitely got her attention.

We mainstream Christians in established churches may not always remember this, but Jesus' original followers were pretty much losers in the eyes of society: lowly fishermen, despised tax collectors, prostitutes and criminals, lowlifes rejected by the religion of his day. Maybe that's how Jesus' followers seem to the rest of the world, those people desperate enough, lowly enough, to find hope in Jesus' message about the kingdom of God.

In our gospel reading today Jesus tells us about the kingdom that advances on its own, and that comes for us. For those of us who, established or not, longtime member or walk-in visitor, are struggling or don't feel accepted, are wondering about the future, or who've experienced serious loss or rejection.

The kingdom proclaimed by Jesus Christ has room for everyone. It overturns the things the world says are insurmountable, and creates a new, open - and yes,

perhaps frightening - future. It can be an unsettling promise, but God is on the move in our lives and in our communities, and God will in time complete the work God has started.

We can't measure the strength of God's promises by our human efforts, yet we can allow the promises of the God who created light out of darkness, and raised Jesus from the dead, to give us confidence when we see God's reign lived out, and faith when we don't. God is with us and for us, and we can give our all, knowing that no work done in love is ever lost, that God will always draw things together for good. For we are part of the new creation that God waters to life in baptism and feeds at the table of holy communion through Jesus Christ, to whom, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, now and forever.

Amen.