

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.13.21

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Thus 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. On 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. All 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.

Mark 4:26-34

He also said, “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.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It 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.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. (327)

The scandal of this week’s gospel passage is that it’s going to happen anyway. No matter what we do, or fail to do, the kingdom of God will happen. It will grow and spread. Like mustard, it will take over everything, though having begun small, now everywhere. It will happen while we labor for it. It will happen while we sleep. It will happen because of us. It will happen on spite of us. It will happen irrespective of us. It’s really not all about us. So, relax—a little anyway. This is the reign of *God* that we’re talking about, after all. Who are we to think we could force it, or we could thwart it?

Someone has scattered seed on the ground—and I wonder who it could have been. In the language of Godly Play, I wonder who it could have been, the one imagined in the parable to have scattered seed on the ground.

Could it have been Jesus, he whose words were like seed, he whose mission was one of spreading—spreading healing, spreading God’s power which upsets worldly power? I wonder if perhaps he was the sower.

Or might it have been the like of us, Jesus' disciples, or we of Jesus' church? Do a little here and there, sowing grace, sowing kindness, sowing love, all like seeds. And then the seeds do what they do, which is a great mystery.

I mean, how do they do that? Seeds in soil?

This would make it so Jesus himself might be that seed—a thing buried in the ground which has it then rise, more glorious and life-giving than ever before.

Or perhaps we are those seeds, each of us, or each iteration of Jesus' church, the Monterey Church, the Church on the Hill. Scattered, buried; still bearing promise?

Or mustard? Are we that, something that did indeed begin small—the smallest of beginnings, a tiny, insignificant seed as our beginning, a crucified Lord; an illiterate, childless criminal, but not even a particularly impressive criminal, just someone who wasn't here to stand with the empire and wasn't here to stand with the Temple and wasn't here to join any particular cause but the cause of compassion and love, and who then died, and who though returned alive and said, "Peace be with you," to the disciples who might have been readying themselves for war (for there was enough war going around; it would have been easy enough to join *some* fight)—but then grew like mustard, a plant you really *don't* want in your garden because, once it's growing, there's really no stopping it, and it uproots everything that is not *it*, eradicates everything that is the not mustard-cum-kingdom of God: could the manifold congregations of Jesus' church be the mustard? Invasive? Leaving nothing untouched?

Who's to say? Who's to say what the world would look like if the church had never taken hold? A lot has been done wrong in the name of the church. We could list them here. Who's to say how much has been done right? Who's to say whether the world is a better place for the event of Jesus Christ lying at the center of it all? Year 0, with time before and time since. Who's to say the time since hasn't been a long, slow unfolding of the reign of God, God's will done on earth as in heaven?

There are all these how-to church books. As the church flags in social influence, as its status fades and numbers dwindle, there is an abounding crop of how-to church books. Some of them are good; some of them are not-so good. It depends upon your point of view, and what you perceive as the needs of your church. How to grow your church. How to increase the giving. How to move into the 21st century, which is 1/5 over so let's get with it, people. How to widen your mission. How to increase your impact. How to be relevant. How to structure your governance.

These can be useful.

The underlying message, though, of there being so many is that this is all a question of technique. The church is a matter of which technique works best and should therefore be deployed. So, pastors become technocrats, tinkering with the *how*. Congregations are but the deployment of those techniques. Expressions of faith are matters of technology—either primitive or advanced, whether puppets and felt boards or rock bands and TikTok videos, whether pamphlets with talking points or bullet-pointed belief systems, whether mission statements (which are very short) or vision statements (which are less short), everything said just right and printed in the right font.

Underlying this underlying message is the assumption that this is all about what we *do*. The success of it has everything to do with what we *do*. But if the kingdom of heaven is as when the sower of seeds sleeps through the night and wakes up in the morning to all sorts of new growth, so much so that the harvest will be soon and will be abundant, then what of all of our precious techniques? We went to seminars to learn them. We attended workshops. We studied the text. Really, what about us at all?

Mary Luti has something to say about this. UCC ordained, professor at Andover Newton Theological School, she has something to say about this. I've heard her say it. I've read her blog about it. "If I hear one more moralizing sermon," she writes, "I think I'm going to scream. Not every sermon has to be an urgent call to become better Christians. [Not every sermon needs to suggest that] I'm not doing what a good Christian should be doing and I need to do better. Not every bible passage is about us..., no matter how earnestly a preacher stands up there trying to wring from it some principle or lesson for human betterment." And, remembering overhearing an old man in a pew behind her one Sunday, she quotes him, muttering as the preacher finished up in the pulpit, "I think I know by now what God wants me to do. What I really want to know is, who is the God who wants me to do it?"

Of course, in the UCC what God wants us to do is less about changing our own hearts and more about changing the world, and therefore having a congregation fully equipped to do that. And, hey, I noticed this week that there is still a homeless problem, so get back out there and take care of that, would you please? And I noticed there are still hungry people, so go fix that and report back here next Sunday for another harangue. I also noticed, of course, that this congregation is pretty small, so get back out there and prove our liberal faith *bona fides* to our neighbors so they'll see we're normal, respectable, socially responsible people, and will want to join us because they approve of what we're doing (even if the reason for our doing it is weird: because

we love Jesus?) We've got mustard to grow! We've got seeds to crack open so to pry out their promise. Why are you just sitting there?!

Which reminds me of this moment in the reading we didn't hear this morning but which we did consider on Wednesday at Bible study. This from the Old Testament, from about 900 years before Christ. It's all about when Samuel went looking for a new king. He'd already anointed Saul to be their king, at the insistence of the people, an insistence we heard about last week.

They'd wanted an earthly king, which the prophet Samuel hesitated to grant them, but the Lord (who was actually to be their king) gave the go-ahead to do. He did this though also issuing a warning that an earthly king would bring the people as much misery as the legitimacy they were hoping for.

Samuel anointed Saul for the position.

But Saul proved unworthy of the position. He wasn't brutal enough in war. He hesitated at wiping whole peoples out—and that wasn't okay. (Such perhaps was the world before the dispensation of Jesus, that there really was only one reason to be chagrined when it came to brutality, and that was when you weren't brutal enough. Maybe Jesus changed that preference for brutality? Maybe the church changed that value system, that the meanest, toughest is the best?) So, Samuel was to find another, was to go to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse, where one among his sons would prove worthy to be king.

Jesse brought out six of his sons.

Samuel moved down the line. Beginning with the eldest, he could sense though that none was the one.

At last, Jesse was to summon the youngest, who was out tending the sheep. Jesse hadn't even bothered to bring him along for consideration. David, the shepherd boy: when brought in, it was clear he was to be king.

But before he came, while Samuel was amidst the discerning, he said this interesting thing. Having concluded about each son, "The Lord has not chosen this one; neither has the Lord chosen this one. The Lord has not chosen any of these," Samuel said to Jesse, "Send for your youngest son and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here."

"We will not sit down until he comes here." "We will not sit down until the deed is done." See, sitting down is a sign of the work being complete. Sitting down is a sign of one's work being done.

This, by the way, is the significance of Jesus imagined now seated at the right hand of the Father. His saving work is done. His creative work is complete. “It is finished,” he said from the cross according to the Gospel of John, this gospel which understands Jesus as the creative agent of God in the world, come to complete God’s yet incomplete creation. There was still something here to be worked on and worked out. There was still something of sin that bit around the edges and gnawed from the middle, and it needed to be worked out, like pocks of air in the clay of ceramics: to knead, to work, that what’s made will hold together even in the heat and fire of the kiln.

But then Jesus went on and was at last seated at the right hand of the Father.

So he’s imagined now, as sitting beside the Father, his saving work is as done, as if all that’s left is for it to take hold and have its mysterious, powerful effect.

And so, it does.

And so, it will, such that none can stop it.

It will just take time.

Do you believe that? How hard do we have to push this mighty river?

I had a boss once, a Hallmark store where I would work during the Christmas rush. He would always ask me why I was sitting whenever I sat down. It would always have me stand back up, find something to do—because there was always something to do. It was a Hallmark store at Christmas, after all, which means it always looked like a war zone.

But look at you all here, sitting down, as if there isn’t still something to do, something you should be doing. Meanwhile, the world groans on, hunger, homelessness, sickness, war, addiction, loneliness. So, why are you just sitting here? The world is groaning, as if in labor pains. Do something!

I remember when I was pregnant with each of the boys. I remember feeling astonished that I was growing a baby though I had not the first clue as to how I was doing that.

How *was* I doing that? *Was* I doing that?

Here’s a poem by Brigit Pegeen Kelly, written in 1985. It’s called “Doing Laundry on Sunday.”

So this is the Sabbath, the stillness
in the garden, magnolia
bells drying damp petticoats

over the porch rail, while bicycle
wheels thrum and the full-breasted tulips
open their pink blouses

for the hands that pressed them first
as bulbs into the earth.
Bread, too, cools on the sill,

and finches scatter bees
by the Shell Station where a boy
in blue denim watches oil

spread in phosphorescent scarves
over the cement. He dips
his brush into a bucket and begins

to scrub, making slow circles
and stopping to splash water on the children
who, hours before it opens,

juggle bean bags outside Gantsy's
Ice Cream Parlor,
while they wait for color to drench their tongues,

as I wait for water to bloom
behind me—white foam, as of magnolias,
as of green and yellow

birds bathing in leaves—wait,
as always, for the day, like bread, to rise
and, with movement

imperceptible, accomplish everything.

The scandal of the parable we remember Jesus this morning to have told so long ago is that it implies we're not much needed for the success of God's coming reign.

It was the same scandal Ezekiel prophesied to the people. Now in exile, they were still relying on force. They would attempt to partner with neighboring Egypt against their conquerors, Babylon, a treacherous alliance they thought would turn back time, return them to the way things had been.

"Don't do it," was Ezekiel's unwelcome message. "Just let this be. Just trust that God can work even in Babylon for the sake of wellbeing, for the sake of justice and love." And it was the hardest thing to believe. It was the toughest thing to take—that their once mighty nation could be reduced to an annexed people amidst someone else's empire. Losing status is just the worst thing, the hardest thing to cope with. People will fight hard against that.

Meanwhile, seeds sown are doing their thing, and we know not how. For this, sow them when you can: sow kindness, sow love, sow justice that will grow. Rest assured when you can't that God is powerful beyond what you can imagine, powerful to save even beyond what you can dream while you sleep. Sit and trust on this lovely June day.

I love that this reading always comes to us in June. It's the perfect counterweight to some much harder texts ahead. As for now, ready your blanket for Tanglewood. Dust off your picnic basket for Jacob's pillow. Trust that this, your church, is just as God would have it be. It's June, and God is good, and the day rises and accomplishes everything.

Thanks be to God.