

Sermon for July 26, 2020

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Texts: 1 Kings 3: 5-12 and Matthew 13:31-33, and 44-52

Sermon Title: *The Kingdom of God is like kudzu*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, we come before you with sighs too deep for words. Our world is in chaos, and we feel overwhelmed by the civil unrest, the virus and the troubled economy. We have lost confidence in the institutions that we have relied upon to keep us safe and secure. In this time and place, open our hearts to your presence in the ordinary events in our lives. You are with us in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. May our lives reflect our confidence in Christ's presence in our lives. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Wind, and cleanse us from within; come as Holy Light, and illumine us; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

Earlier this summer, I was listening to a podcast of an expert on bees. He described varieties of bees, their preferential habitat, and how to support their dwindling populations. As we have been hearing these last few years, the population of some wild bees is seriously endangered, and bees are necessary for the pollination of many plants. The bottom line is that if we want to eat fruits and vegetables, we better take care of the bees. The expert said that he had a website with pictures of his backyard so that people could visualize what a bee-attractive habitat might look like. A typical email that the expert received after folks had visited the website was this: *How can I support bees without my back yard looking like yours?* Apparently, the expert's back yard wasn't mowed within specific boundaries, nor were the flowerbeds carefully tended, weeded, and mulched. It was chaotic gardening, but the bees were happy.

I wonder if Christians don't sometimes react in the same way as those visitors to the bee web site. As Presbyterians, we love to do things decently and in order; we have our creeds, liturgy, doctrines, and our beliefs about baptism and marriage. But just when we are least expecting it, God pushes us beyond our understanding and our comfort level. *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed* – a reminder of how God is forever invading our orderly sense of things.

That's exactly what Jesus was doing, pushing the crowds into a new understanding of the Kingdom of God, when he told them the parable of the mustard seed. This parable has been tamed over the centuries to suggest

phenomenal growth from something small. While this interpretation delivers hope to any generation, it was not what Jesus intended. The mustard seed produces a trash tree, no matter how tall it grows. The trees that grew from the mustard seed were the kudzu of the Middle East. So what could Jesus have meant?

Our reading from Matthew's Gospel contains four parables of subversion, and one of final judgment. The first four: mustard and yeast, a thief and a merchant. **Mustard is a weed a farmer would pull from a field, and yeast is a corrupting agent, wild yeast, not the yeast used in kitchen.** To the crowds that heard these parables, leaven would have been understood as something that could be dangerous. The leavening agent was created by setting aside a portion of leftover bread to spoil, in order to create leaven for future baking. If the leaven wasn't spoiled enough, it could not cause the new batter to rise. Left to spoil too long, it could result in food poisoning.

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast are parables that speak to the power of transformation. If God can use mustard seed and corrupt leaven to grow the Kingdom, imagine what God can do with us.

These parables are filled with ordinary things, and ordinary people, a fact which encourages me to look in the territory of my own life to see where mustard seeds are germinating and yeast is leavening. I feel the joy and surprise of the man finding the treasure buried in a field. What action would such joy inspire in me? Finding the kingdom is like a man who finds a treasure hidden in a field, then sells all he has and buys the field. What motivates individuals, groups, and movements to step into dangerous and unknown territory for the sake of the Kingdom? The merchant who searches for fine pearls finds one of great value and sells all he has to buy it. Each man makes a sacrifice, and when he does, he is out of the rat race of buying and selling because he has nothing left to buy or sell. Think John Lennon's song *Imagine*.

Whatever else these parables mean, Jesus was using them to suggest that good citizenship in God's kingdom is very different from good citizenship in Rome's. These parables present a radical challenge to Christianity in the United States, where Christianity is largely middle-class, conservative, and convention-supporting. If our society resembles the empire of Rome more than it does the Kingdom of Heaven, then helping people adjust or fit into this society is not the work of the church. As Warren Carter writes in his

commentary on the parable of the woman leavening flour, *if a person is well adjusted in a sick society, corrupting is the only path to wholeness*. The church's work is to make disciples who value the contemporary equivalents of weeds, yeast, thieves, and merchants.

In the spirit of what Jesus was doing, I've created some modern parables about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is like Rosa Parks who says *I've had enough*, and keeps her seat on the bus. The Kingdom of God is like a pregnant cow, or a flock of ducks in the Heifer Project, bringing life and transformation to Africa. The Kingdom of God is like Trinity Presbyterian church in Atlanta, whose congregation deliberately set up an integrated private elementary school in their Sunday School classrooms during segregation. They lost ¼ of their congregation over this decision. But the church held to God's value of inclusiveness, and took a stand. Andrew Young's children went through this elementary school, which is still in existence today. In time, many other private elementary schools followed Trinity's example.

The Kingdom of God is like a person, young or old, who says *that's not a very nice name to call* Native Americans, or gays and lesbians, or the elderly. The kingdom of God is like the Presbyterian minister John Rankin and his family who hid many of the escaping 2000 slaves who crossed the Ohio River. The Kingdom of God is like those who get involved with efforts to support the unaccompanied children arriving in the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

One risky behavior that each one of us can do is to step far enough into these parables to let hope claim us. Because these are parables of hope. Our hearts can begin to notice how God's reign is hidden in the midst of everyday life. I can trust that God is transforming the world and me just as surely as I can trust yeast to transform dough and God's seed, whether it is a mustard seed of kudzu, to invade and take over a territory.

The last parable of sorting and judgment the good fish from the bad reiterates Kingdom values. The Kingdom embraces the marginalized, the unclean, the left out. These are also Jesus' true family, and only God is the final judge of the catch. If fishermen are willing to pull in all sorts of fish indiscriminately, and sort them out later, then maybe I can let God take care of the sorting in God's own time

At the end of this week's Gospel reading, Jesus asks the disciples *Have you understood all this?* I am fascinated by the idea that we are being trained for the Kingdom, being taught how to take care of such treasures. Certainly part of that training means that I must commit my life to justice, mercy, and hope. If your answer is also *yes*, then it is your responsibility to live these Kingdom values and give all you have and all that you are in the present to the actualization of the Kingdom in the here and now. Don't worry if your *yes* is a tentative one whispered so no one else can hear. God hears and will give you the voice to proclaim a grace-infused world of hope brought near.

When we pray the prayer that Jesus taught and say *your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, let us do so with hope and without being tempted by cynicism. If we cannot find the Kingdom of God here and now, we will never find it, because it is in this good earth and in our own stories that the seeds of heaven are sown. AMEN.