

June 13, 2021
Mark 4:26-34

Pentecost 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Invasive Kingdom”

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?”

My father’s vegetable garden was a source of great pride for him and a reminder of his childhood on the family farm. He would spend countless hours in the garden, beginning in the spring when he would turn over the soil and prepare it for planting. By mid-May he would carefully line up the rows for planting seeds and plants, and in June he would harvest rhubarb and strawberries and the plants began to grow and the seeds sprouted from the earth. He would be out in the garden every day watering the plants and checking on their growth; but one task that did not bring him any joy was when he discovered invasive weeds in his beloved garden. He took it as a personal insult that these unwanted plants dared invade the garden he so lovingly cared for; you could hear him mumbling under his breath as he got down on his hands and knees to pull out these invaders. I often witnessed his grumbling because one of my chores was to help my father in the garden, and I had to agree that these weeds were at the very least a nuisance and at worst a threat to all the work that my father put into planting and growing the produce that fed our family and most of our neighbourhood.

Anyone who works in their garden or lawn knows how frustrating it can be to control weeds and other invasive species that often seem to proliferate at an alarming rate. When Susan and I walk through our neighbourhood we often see people pulling weeds out of their garden beds and trying to control unwanted plants in their front lawns. Such invasive species are not only an annoyance but pose a serious threat to native species of plants that once enjoyed unfettered growth and abundance in our area. According to Conservation Ontario, conservation authorities are tackling several invasive species which pose a growing threat to Ontario’s economy and native biodiversity. These invasive species – which include purple loosestrife, garlic mustard, buckthorns, emerald ash borer, and reed canary grass – damage important natural ecosystems such as wetlands, forests, lakes, rivers, and streams, and threaten agricultural practices, infrastructure, tourism, fisheries, and water quality and quantity. Conservation authorities are working to address the threat of invasive species that are not a mere nuisance but pose a serious danger to our natural habitat and the fruits of the harvest that we are privileged to enjoy here in Ontario.

So, it may come as a surprise that the focus of Jesus' parable in today's Gospel lesson is on invasive species. The "parable of the mustard seed" is often interpreted as a lesson on how small beginnings – such as the mustard seed which "*when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all the seeds of the earth*" (Mark 4:31) resulting in a great shrub whose large branches provide shade "*so that the birds of the air can make their nests in its shade*" (4:32). It is often used as a lesson that "*from small things ... big things one day come*" (Bruce Springsteen). But to the original hearers of this parable, Jesus' use of the mustard shrub would have been confusing and even unsettling; mustard was a lot less like a flowering shrub that one might plant around the edges of the property as an accent than it was an invasive weed, "*something you want to keep out of your garden and lawn at all costs because it runs amok easily, gets out of hand, and nearly takes over whatever ground it infests*" (David Lose). The presence of a mustard shrub would have caused as much grumbling among Jesus' original hearers as the weeds in our backyard garden caused grumbling for my usually cheerful father.

But it is not by accident that Jesus chooses an invasive species as the subject of his parable, for Jesus often chooses surprising or disruptive subjects for these means through which he taught the crowds: "*he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples*" (4:34). While parables appear throughout the Gospels, they are often confused with fables, which are stories meant to offer some insight into and instruction about life (like to Tortoise and the Hare). A parable, on the other hand, "*is intended to be disruptive, to interrupt what you thought you knew and not just teach you something but actually to confront you with a surprising and often unwanted truth*" (Lose). Parables are Jesus' way of teaching about the Kingdom of God, a reminder of the word of the Lord spoken through Isaiah that "*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*" (Isaiah 55:8-9). Two of the most famous parables evidence the disruptive nature of Jesus' parables: in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the younger son shows a complete lack of respect for his father when he demands that the father "*give me the share of my property that will belong to me*" (Luke 15:12); since this would rightfully belong to the son only after his father's death, he is brazenly telling his father that he considers the older man already dead to him. Then after he squanders this inheritance "*in dissolute living*" and is reduced to abject poverty, the prodigal returns to his father, who not only forgives the son but welcomes him back with a sumptuous banquet, while the elder son who remains loyal is kept on the sidelines. While this parable describes the gracious love of the waiting

father, there is something unjust and offensive about what happens to this disrespectful, prodigal son.

The other parable that is disruptive at its core is the Good Samaritan, in which three travellers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho come upon a crime victim who has been left “half dead” on the side of the road. The first two travellers are respected religious leaders in the community; when both the priest and the Levite see the wounded man, each *“passed by on the other side”* (Luke 10:31). But the third traveller reacts differently; when he sees the man lying on the side of the road, he has compassion for him; *“he went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him”* (10:34). There is no doubt as to *“which one of the three ... was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers”* (10:36); but the disruptive part of this parable is that *“the one who showed him mercy”* is a Samaritan, a member of a people who were despised by Jesus’ people. Jesus could have chosen anyone as the person who shows compassion, but he chooses a member of a group with whom his people did not associate as the hero of his parable. Jesus’ parables teach us that *“God’s kingdom comes apart from our efforts, cannot be controlled or influenced, and can only be received as a gift ... kingdom-faith, like love, is something that comes from the outside and grabs hold of you, whether you want it to or not.”* (Lose).

The two parables in today’s Gospel lesson from Mark continue Jesus’ teaching on the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God into human history. In the first parable, a sower scatters seed on the ground but is not involved in the subsequent growth of the seed: *“the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how”* (4:27). As soon as the ripe grain appears, the sower comes to harvest the crop, following the words spoken by the prophet Joel: *“Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great”* (Joel 3:13), harvest often appears in the Old Testament as a symbol for judgment. In Jesus’ usage of this sowing and reaping imagery, the emergence of the kingdom of God is unnoticed by many, but the people will have no difficulty recognizing the ripe fruit. Even though Jesus’ ministry may not appear to be establishing the kingdom, it is certainly present; *“human actions can neither hasten nor delay the coming of the kingdom, which has begun in Jesus’ ministry”* (PHEME PERKINS). Human efforts may sometimes seem to be in vain, but in the end we shall marvel, as a sower at harvest. Growth and change will occur while we sleep, we know not how; but we rejoice in the assurance that *“I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it”* (Ezekiel 17:24). God’s divine reign *“is*

apocalyptic and automatic and on a divine timetable, like the growth of the seed” (David Jacobsen).

The second parable, the parable of the mustard seed, is often matched with the parable of the cedar in Ezekiel:

- “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.” – Ezekiel 17:22-24.

The contrast between the cedar tree and mustard shrub suggests that the hope proclaimed by Jesus is of a different quality than that of Israel’s prophets and of the usual human vision of greatness. The “great tree” of prophetic imagery (*“the tree that you saw, which grew great and strong, so that its top reached to heaven and was visible to the end of the earth ...”* – Daniel 4:20) corresponds to a kingdom that rules all the people of the world. Changing the image for the Kingdom of God from a tree to a shrub emphasizes that the God’s kingdom is both different and greater than all human kingdoms. The parable speaks of a kingdom which, for all its miraculous extension, remains lowly; *“the image corresponds closely to the picture of the kingdom of God in Mark: a mystery whose realization will come as a surprise, a reality whose weakness is its power.”* (Lamar Williamson, Jr.).

One of the results of the growth of the mustard shrub is that it *“puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade”* (4:32). As beautiful and comforting as this image of birds resting in the shade of the shrub may be, we must also remember that it was these same birds who ate up the seed that fell on the path in Jesus’ parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-9). The presence of birds can be as much of a threat to the health of the harvest as the invasive species under which they rest. They may represent yet another disturbing aspect of this parable: *“these birds might be the undesirables, the folks decent people avoid, the one we prefer to keep in the other side of our street and, preferably, outside our homes”* (Lose). It is a reminder that there is room for all people in the kingdom of God, and that the original followers of Jesus were often those who were looked down upon by others

in their culture: lowly fishermen, despised tax collectors, criminals and lowlives despised by the religious establishment. They are the people of whom Paul speaks in his first letter to the Corinthians:

- “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what was foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one may boast in the presence of God.” – 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

Jesus continually reached out to people who others would avoid, incurring the wrath of the “respectable” people of his time who grumbled that *“this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”* (Luke 15:2) because the purpose of the disruptive Kingdom of God is to welcome all people into God’s loving presence, the God who *“so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

- “The Lord’s Prayer, which in the churches we repeat so unthinkingly, commits us to this world in the most concrete and unrelenting ways. To this world *as God’s world* – and therefore *not* as we would have it but as God would have it (*“thy will be done”*), not as it is, but as it is becoming (*“thy kingdom come”*). For as it is, earth is not as it should be; God will mend it. And God will have us participate in its mending. Every time we pray this prayer we commit ourselves anew to that eternal covenant.” – Douglas John Hall.

Working with my father in his beloved garden taught me the importance of caring for the crops we planted so that they would produce an abundant harvest that we would enjoy, and to make certain that no weeds or invasive species threatened the health and prosperity of what had been planted. But while I learned that such invasive species have no place in a garden, my parents also taught me that the invasive nature of the Kingdom of God whose coming they taught me to pray when they taught me the Lord’s Prayer is a disruption of our normal routine that we welcome, because it is the good news of God breaking into human history to fulfill God’s Will in often surprising and unexpected ways. They taught me to pray knowing that *“God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us”* (*Small Catechism*). The coming of God’s kingdom may appear to be as disruptive as the invasive mustard shrub, and the shade it offers to birds can be as surprising as the people who we may find with us in the

gathering of Jesus' disciples that is the church; but this surprising and disruptive coming of God's reign is a sign that the God whose grace is truly amazing is a God who is continually working among us and whose work will continue until all that God purposes is accomplished and all are gathered together in the presence of the Lord, who comes to us in an invasive and disruptive manner so that everything that seeks to separate us from God's love might be disrupted and that as God's people we may *"accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever."* (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Amen.