

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I'm no farmer and I don't have a great green thumb, so it took me a lot of reading this week to realize just how odd these parables are. If you're like me, the oddness of these parables may not jump out to you right away either.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells two parables. As Pastor Jason said last week, "parables work to describe a new reality, and they provide some kind of image to help the listeners grasp that reality." The images in this parable have to do with planters, seeds, and mustard plants. And Jesus uses these images to teach something surprising about God's word in the world and vision for all people.

You see, in the first parable the planter plants- no, he just SCATTERS, the seed on the ground and then he goes to sleep. The planter doesn't DO anything- the seed is scattered and grows- and yet he does not know how. This would have sounded QUITE odd to farmers- people who would have put more thought into planting a seed- they may have considered if that seed needed shade or sun to grow or the spacing of that seed to other plants and seeds.

And in the second parable- Jesus uses a mustard seed and shrub to describe God's vision for the world. But what is odd about it is that it was not uncommon for the Roman empire and other great empires of the time to describe themselves as towering cedars (like these), huge majestic trees towering above all the others. So for Jesus to describe the Kingdom of God- or for the way of life marked by God's

vision for the world- NOT as a huge cedar tree, but as a mustard SHRUB (like this)- must have been disorienting and confusing. Not only was it a shrub, but it would have been widely known as a WEED. A somewhat pesky plant that was unwanted by a lot of people on their land and that one would NOT have planted ON PURPOSE.

Not only do these images seem kind of odd, but also the people he was speaking to would have seemed odd to the rest of society. Perhaps the odd-balls of society, you could say.

The people Jesus was speaking to were most likely seen as the “weeds” of their society- a mass of people who don’t hold importance in the temples or courts or any other public spaces, but yet are numerous and growing. One commentator said that, “The vast majority of those who gather around Jesus when he is giving the word are poor, diseased, demon-possessed, or considered sinners.”¹

No one was looking for God’s word in mustard plants and no one was looking for God’s vision to be lived out among these particular people either.

Perhaps you know exactly what it feels like to be the odd-ball of your family, your work or the world. To feel like people don’t expect very much of you. Or maybe it’s not that so much as sometimes the challenges of life are so great, sometimes YOU don’t feel like you have much to offer.

¹ Raquel S. Lettsome, “Mark,” *The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) 185.

As things are opening back up here in Chicago, and there are more events, and social gatherings- I thought I'd bounce back to what normal life looked like. But, honestly, I find instead that it is hard to shake the feeling of being run down and burnt out by this 15 months of pandemic...I DON'T have as much energy as I thought I would to offer. I'm finding it's not as easy as I thought to crawl out of this forced isolation... social anxieties before the pandemic are exacerbated now. I find myself with new apprehensions, new challenges as I re-learn how to live life in this new phase of life in the city.

If you're like me, in times of difficulty, crises and pandemic- what we lack can seem to overshadow what we DO have. And It can be difficult to see God's work and word around us and to even feel worthy of being part of such work.

Or when it comes to fighting for change and racial justice, perhaps you've wondered if the protests, the letter-writing, the outrage - this past year and over the centuries- has it been for nothing? It just doesn't seem to be happening fast enough!

Scholar David Jacobsen recounts how weeks ago during the trial of the police officers who killed George Floyd, the many witnesses who were present on the corner that day attested to what they saw, attested to how they cried out for mercy for him, how they videotaped. And they did everything they could in that moment

to stop what was happening. They gave tearful testimonies about how nothing they did seemed to matter in that moment or was able to save his life in that moment.²

It would seem that their individual efforts were lacking something, they just weren't enough.

Lucky for us, God works with the most imperfect and even burnt out and stressed out people... God's Word works in the ordinary and yes, even in people and parts of life that are more like pesky weeds than a majestic cedar at the prime of life.

Jesus, surrounded by the peasant and farmer crowds, showed how God's work could grow and blossom even when the farmer was too tired and went to bed and instead of nurturing it. And Jesus reminds them even the most rejected of plants can grow in abundance and provide life giving shade to the birds around it.

His message to the people there with him was that, so too, the Word of God and the love that marks God's vision for the world takes root in mysterious ways and grows in abundance when we aren't even looking. There is no stopping it AND even the most imperfect people can join in God's vision for the world.

Jesus reminds his listeners that *it is not all up to them*. Just as seeds, in the right conditions, only need to feel the soil around them and the heat of the sun to start growing up and up and towards the sun and into a plant or tree to be harvested-

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-mark-426-34-5>

so too, when his listeners are in the depths of hopelessness and can't see anything beyond who they aren't or the energy and resources they don't have- God's vision takes root in the broken world through broken people to create life and fruit and rest for God's creation.

What they may lack in the eyes of the world or even in their own view of themselves, does not and will not keep them from participating in God's work on earth.

David Jacobsen, in his reflection, goes on to say that what he was struck by is that even though the witnesses didn't save George Floyd, still the verdict of the jury found the officer guilty. This meant something important to the centuries long fight against police brutality and keeping police officers accountable in a way they rarely have been before.

Ordinary people just going about their days, crying out for justice when they saw a man being murdered, and then testifying in court- offers us a glimpse of how a scattered collection of flawed and imperfect individuals can unexpectedly germinate, sprout and grow as they share their truth with the world. Then, collectively, their testimonies offered a moment of relief and shade for fellow humans on this long struggle for justice.³

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-mark-426-34-5>

So too, at this stage of our journeys in the pandemic, we are invited into this paradoxical nature of God's vision of the world. We're invited to hear God's Word- not in light of what we lack or the million excuses we might give for why we are not worthy or ready - but in light of the mysterious unstoppable abundance of God's love and vision pervading this world.

We're invited to join in God's work to bring about this vision not thinking that we can control or manage it, but in humility. Knowing that God came to us first. God always comes to us first. God always will come to us.

Today and each Sunday as we take the bread and wine at the communion table, the body of blood of Christ, we have a reminder of this promise. Of God's love that meets us wherever we are, in the most unexpected time and places. Even to the most broken, most overwhelmed, most burnt out and tired among us. May we all rest in the cool shade of this promise.

AMEN.