

Mark 4:26-34

26 He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

30 He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;³² 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.’

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

At Home among the Weeds

Any drive by the parsonage would show you that I am no friend to yard work or gardening. The dandelions are not winning the war over my lawn; they won a long time ago. My strategy is just to keep anything that grows in front of the house, besides the trees, to under a foot tall and enjoy the lovely yellow dandelions that so adorn our yard.

I could tell my own parable like Jesus told us; “The Kingdom of God is like dandelions; they begin as a tiny seeds that parachute throughout your yard, and soon these pretty yellow flowers will be everywhere, and all the bees and butterflies and little animals can come and enjoy them.” Now some of you would probably look quite seriously, furrow your brow, nod your head slowly, and think, “Mmmm...yes...Kingdom of God like dandelions. Very wise, Pastor Matt.” But others would be thinking, “Matt’s potato has been baking a little too long. Must be he spend too much time in the sun, mowing dandelions, or he banged his head sometime during Annual Conference. Doesn’t he know that dandelions are weeds? Doesn’t he realize that Home Depot has herbicides designed specifically to *kill* dandelions?”

Well, the mustard plant is a weed as well, and farmers in Jesus’ day would have wanted neither mustard “trees” nor birds making nests under them, waiting for their crops to sprout up so they could peck away at them. There would have been some in the congregation who have thought that because Jesus is a preacher he must know what he’s talking about, but I have a feeling that most of them would have thought this guy to be a little bit cuckoo; some would have probably told him so. The kingdom of God is supposed to be beautiful, magnificent, glorious and, above all, desirable, something we would definitely like, not a dangerous weed that invades our fields and threatens our livelihood. How can the kingdom of God be something that endangers us?

How indeed! In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is not so good at telling his audience what they want to hear, and I have to tell you that pastors who follow Jesus are not so good at telling you what you want to hear either. I can cajole you with sermons about God’s love and joy and all those wonderful aspects of God, but such sentiments bring you only temporary satisfaction if they actually bring you any satisfaction at all, because if most of your days are spent not experiencing

God's love or God's joy. Eventually you might dismiss me as a liar if I keep telling you about all the wonderful things about God, and none of them seem to apply to your life. Jesus was not a liar; he was telling people exactly what the Kingdom of God was like, and it was not his fault if people didn't like what he had to say. Maybe the kingdom of God was not going to devastate their crops, but there would be some aspects of it that most people would not welcome. I've just come back from Annual Conference and my arm is tired from raising it so many times for so many votes – "...those in favor of the petition raise their hand. Put your hands down. Now those opposed raise their hand.." Not everything I voted for was passed, and not everything I voted against failed; not every decision the United Methodist Church makes is a decision I support. Those pieces of legislation that I don't support but were passed are WEEDS to me. Those things that I wanted to pass but didn't are weeds to me, but part of my faith is that WHEN WE AS A CHURCH ARE PRAYERFUL, GOD LEADS US IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, and I am not always right. Do you think that's possible? *Naw; I'm the pastor!*

Okay, ideas and petitions are one thing, but what about *people*? Can people be weeds? I'll be honest; in some of our legislative sessions, things got a little ugly; there was even some indirect name-calling – that's right; name-calling among clergy – and it had to be reined in by the bishop. Do we ever call other people *weeds* or think of them as *weeds, undesirables, undeserving of our attention or love, people we would be glad NOT to have around*? Examine your heart for a moment. Are there people like that, people you will not tolerate and you refuse to love? Are there people that you hope God will cast into the abyss before you take matters into your own hand and cast them there yourself? Are there human weeds that you'd like to be rid of eternally?

Now perhaps you understand what Jesus was talking about; "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed." It's something you may not like, and if your heart doesn't change that seed will grow into a plant and will only get bigger and eventually overtake the kingdom YOU'VE constructed.

So how can we change our perspective? How can we stop seeing the mustard plant as a weed and start seeing it as a thing of beauty?

The answer is to start praying. Jesus says love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. That is *so* counterintuitive, isn't it? That just goes against our whole nature doesn't it? We don't *love* our enemies; we bomb them. We don't pray for those who persecute us; we pray that God would unleash his wrath upon them. But what happens when you pray, when you reach out to communicate with the Living God? The answer is that you receive new eyes, so you can find beauty in something that first seemed ugly, you see potential in something that looked hopeless. You also see that through other sets of eyes, *you* might be the weed. And eventually you start seeing through the eyes of Jesus, and you recognize our common humanity, our interconnectedness. You start seeing that we all belong to the same family. You can't pray that your enemy is snuffed because your enemy is a child of the same God who birthed you. If your biological brother or sister was doing something that bothered you, rather than killing them wouldn't you want to have a serious talk with them and ask why they did it? Wouldn't you care about what motivates them? Wouldn't you want to *understand* your brother or sister? And wouldn't you care more about their well-being than about your own convenience?

There was a movie called *The Day after Tomorrow* that came out back in 2004. The movie was a great disaster movie about global warming causing changes in weather patterns, and a giant, severe blizzard engulfs most of the United States, resulting in a mass migration southward to Mexico, and one very ironic scene shows United States citizens attempting to scale the fences they erected in order to enter Mexico. The shoe was suddenly on the other foot. Prayer helps you see the other foot. Prayer helps you see the world through the eyes of the mustard tree, through the eyes of a weed. Prayer allows you to recognize that to the stranger, you may be the weed.

Another beautiful part of the Annual Conference was a service of repentance given by the non-indigenous peoples who live on this continent, in which we repented and asked forgiveness from the Native American community. As one Native American put it, she was not at any of the massacres that occurred in past centuries, and she had not experienced being driven off of her native lands, but she is connected to her ancestors through heritage and memory, and so those atrocities of the past do affect her. Likewise we were not *directly* involved in the abuses that took place long ago, but many of us are connected to those who did by our heritage. You know the whole Annual Conference began with an invocation from the Shinnecock nation letting us know that we are welcome on this land. Some may say that it's absurd for them to welcome us because we conquered their people long ago, but that welcome for me was an offering of sweet forgiveness that I never formally asked for. Their welcoming us was grace given to weeds.

My prayer is that we could live as weeds among weeds, that we could recognize that someone out there may not be all that keen on welcoming you and I into their garden, but does so nonetheless, and does so graciously, even though in their eyes we may seem no more than weeds. Let us embrace our common weedhood, accept that the Kingdom of God is inhabited by such as us, and welcome one another graciously. We are all weeds in someone's eyes, but we are all beloved in God's eyes. Amen.