

"A Real Wild One"

Mark 4:26-34 Parable of the Growing Seed & Parable of the Mustard Seed

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Last Zoom Worship

I.

This! Is our very last Zoom worship! Amazing. I am so looking forward to seeing many of your faces next week when we begin in-person services.

This past week I was blessed to be in-person with a wonderful group of people, for a Mandala-Making Workshop. The whole reason we wanted to think about mandalas is because they can re-center us after a time of disorientation. The word "mandala" means "circles" in sanskrit. The group was marveling at how many mandala shapes there are in nature, and really all around us. In the Fountain Courtyard at church, we observed mandalas in tiny pinecones, the stones surrounding the fountain, in roses and succulents, and then... someone pointed out that our eyes are mandalas. The concentric circles and geometric shapes in our very eyes, so beautiful, such a sacred gift. And when all we can see over a mask is a person's eyes, it can be an invitation to feel God's presence. So next week, whether you're at in-person worship, or you see another real, live, human being, as you gaze over their mask, into their eyes, just take a moment to thank God for their loveliness and savor them. Yes! God is in our midst!

So I could go on about mandalas and how excited I am to see some of you next week, but I do actually have a sermon to preach this morning, and it is about these two sneaky little parables, the Parable of the Growing Seed, and the Parable of the Mustard Seed. I say sneaky because there is a lot of meaning that can be drawn out of just a few verses. What is the Realm of God like? Jesus says, the Realm of God is like when a person scatters seeds on the ground, doesn't do anything to help them grow, and then wakes up one morning to a huge harvest. The Realm of God is like the humble mustard seed, which grows into a tree where birds can nest in its branches.

The usual way of interpreting these parables is: “to God give the glory for a growing faith life” and “great things come from small beginnings.” Those are good messages! But today I wonder how these parables speak to us as we emerge from pandemic life?

II.

I ask this because, after previous pandemics, Christianity has not always emerged with the best theology. Examples of not-awesome theology after a pandemic would be the over-focus of the church on Original Sin especially after the Cyprian Plague in 249, and the Doctrine of Discovery after the Bubonic Plague in 1346. Outbreaks of diseases like leprosy, smallpox, cholera, bubonic plague, spanish flu, and AIDS, have been followed by ghastly sins like xenophobia, racism, homophobia, nationalism, and violence against Jews, Muslims, indigenous peoples, and the Queer community, often with the explicit support of the church. This history is getting more attention lately as we reflect on our current pandemic. But I don't think bad theology has to happen. I sincerely believe that Christianity has something positive to offer the world after a pandemic. There is wisdom in our ancient texts, in the stories of Jesus, and from mystics and justice-workers through the ages. But my hunch is that unless we are strategic in promoting this wisdom, the forces of empire--even from within Christianity-- will speak for us. So today I wonder, how can these two parables be part of the theology we want to share with the world after *this* pandemic? What seeds do we want to plant and grow in our society and in ourselves, right now? What skills and values can we cultivate and share in our community?

III.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is one that many people have heard. And I'm grateful to our church member and farmer, Garth Watson, for sharing with me a few thoughts about this parable. He emailed me and said this parable has always been a bit mysterious to him as a farmer, because mustard doesn't really grow that big, and he sent me a photo of a little mustard he has growing next to a plum tree. Here in Sonoma

County we are pretty familiar with mustard because it's a cover crop for grapevines in the winter. It's so beautiful to see the bare vines, kind of a dark purply brown, with rows of bright sunny yellow among them. Mustard interrupts soil pests that attack grapevine roots and prevents erosion in the rainy season. But as lovely, and as beneficial to the soil health, as it may be, mustard does not get that tall, only like 3 feet. And it's too spritely and spindly for the birds of the air to make their nests in, mustard doesn't grow strong branches like that. Also, and I wouldn't want to contradict Jesus, but between Garth and a Google search, I learned that mustard seeds are not actually the smallest seeds. Ancient farmers probably wouldn't have even planted it because it was considered an invasive weed, spreading quickly by sending shoots underground. So what is Jesus talking about when he says the Realm of God is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds, that grows into a giant tree that birds nest in, when that isn't even a real thing that happens?

Well Jesus has a way of using absurdity and hyperbole to make a point, which is what I think he's doing here. Yes, the mustard tree could be a metaphor for the idea that we only need a wee little bit of faith, to grow into a life of great devotion. But Jesus is also showing us two super important things that the mustard plant does in this parable: it interrupts and it shelters. Not only does mustard as we know it interrupt the cycle of vine pests and erosion, but Jesus' vision of mustard interrupts the usual idea of what a mustard plant is-- an invasive weed nobody would plant-- and turns it into a metaphor for the Realm of God. The second thing that Jesus' mustard tree does in this parable is that it provides shelter to birds. The plant is a hospitable home of welcome for the birds of the air. In a lot of ancient writing, including biblical texts, birds can be a metaphor for Spirit. In this way, the mustard tree becomes a sheltering haven for the spiritual life. The Realm of God is like a big juicy weed that interrupts with its invasive roots and shelters with its sprawling branches. Like our opening song by Iggy Pop this morning, it's a real wild one, it's a real wild child.

So as the Community Church of Sebastopol, I wonder how we might work toward the wild ideals of interrupting and sheltering, as we move forward from the pandemic? I can see us already beginning to do some interrupting-- we try to interrupt poverty through our involvement in the Sebastopol Food Pantry, we take a step to interrupt homelessness with our Safe Parking program, we do our best to interrupt racism through book studies and anti-racist actions. What else needs interrupting, from our point of view as progressive Christians? I bet you can think of twenty more cultural patterns that we could interrupt with our wild and weedy mustard energy. The world needs this! And on a spiritual level, maybe even a personal level, I wonder how we might interrupt the inner voices that distance us from God and each other? Can we interrupt the anxiety, resentment, and automatic reactivity we might find inside ourselves? The polarization we see outward in our society right now, I think is connected to the polarization that happens inside of us. I feel this pretty acutely when I even imagine myself talking about politics with certain members of my own family. I have to work really hard to manage myself, I can feel a jittery sort of anger rising up inside. I have to take a lot of breaks so that I can be with these family members while staying calm and loose. Sometimes playful humor helps. Sometimes I have a little mantra that goes like this: "You don't have to argue, you don't have to agree." But the value that keeps me coming back, and I could be wrong, but often the value that keeps me coming back, is that being in relationship with people I care about is more important to me than my need to be right. Interrupting our own reactivity can help us loosen up our own patterns and stay connected to the people we love.

And that brings us to the mustard tree as a canopy of shelter for the birds of the air. Ultimately I think one of the roles of the church post-pandemic is going to be providing a shelter, a nesting place. What are some of the metaphorical birds we might want nesting in our branches? Perhaps the dove of peace, the raven of hope, the robin red-breast of healthy boundaries! Perhaps the church can be a home for thoughtfulness, a place where people can disagree and still be in relationship with each other, a shelter

for inclusion and radical hospitality. Here's the vision: Just as our invasive mustard roots go underground to disrupt the pesky nematodes of our time, our branches make a canopy of care. That's a community worth working toward. That's what our world might need most as we come out of this pandemic. That's a post-pandemic theology I think we can stand behind.

There is plenty of interrupting and sheltering for the church to do in the days ahead! But I suspect there are very few of us who could sustain that work on our own-- sure we might have a few successes here and there, but we need some Holy Help with all that. Which brings us to the companion parable from today's scripture, the Parable of the Growing Seed. What does the person who scatters the seed do to help it grow? Nothing. No watering, no deer fence, no gopher baskets, nothing. That's why it seems so amazing that the seeds grow, and sprout, and flower and ripen, until a big harvest is ready for the picking. All through the glory of God, not human effort, but the life-giving and life-supporting movement of God in the world. Really it is the fullness of God that gives stability to our roots and strength to our branches, it is God who draws life unto life.

IV.

Julian of Norwich was a 14th century mystic and abbess in England, who survived the bubonic plague. Even before her time, Christianity had begun to be more anti-nature, anti-Earth, and more focused on Original Sin and the Fall of humanity. And when the bubonic plague hit, the society around Julian blamed nature and human sinfulness for the terrible pandemic around them. But, Julian went her own direction. As the wider church and culture blamed the bubonic plague on the wickedness of nature, she wrote these words: "The first good thing is the goodness of nature. God is the same thing as nature. The goodness in nature is God." It took centuries for her work to be recognized, but I think she was a real wild child in the best sense of Iggy Pop, in the best sense of mustardy interruption and shelter, in the best way of relying on the grace of God. As

we move forward from our pandemic, may we too find ways to be like an invasive weed in the garden of empire, to bring about more love and justice in our world, in service to God and our neighbor.

That's *almost* the "Amen" for our sermon today, but I'd like to take a moment to close this sermon with a prayer of blessing, for our final zoom worship service.

Will you pray with me:

God, I give you thanks for our worshiping community. Thank you for innovation and for tools like youtube, facebook live, and zoom, which have enabled us to gather in new ways during the pandemic. Although we have survived on zoom, we look forward to the palpable feeling of gathering in all our aliveness. I ask your blessing upon our next steps, as we transition to livestreaming an in-person worship service. Bless those who are putting so much time and worry and energy into keeping our community safe and our liturgical life strong. And when things don't go as planned, give us patience and guide us as we move forward. We ask it all in the name of Jesus, who teaches us in parables, and whose whole life is a parable, Amen.