

At present, I am fighting a battle with my backyard. It is winning. I believe it is bent on world domination, starting with the reclamation of my house for nature.

Every time I walk my dog, I pull things up and fling them back into the ubiquitous ivy that covers everything.

Seriously, the ivy covers everything. Whose idea was it to introduce this to Georgia?

I'm not even sure that kudzu can keep up with the ivy in my yard. And for that matter, every where there is not ivy, there is Virginia creeper. And everywhere there is not Virginia Creeper, there is milkweed.

It seems that for every weed I pull or kill, at least two grow back. My patio looks like the plains of the Serengeti.

You'll understand then, if this week's lectionary passages with all of their botanical imagery are less than inspiring to me.

Last week's Gospel lection, which we didn't read, was the parable of the sower and the seeds. In it, Jesus talked about the sower who went out and scattered seed everywhere.

He scattered seed on the rocky ground, the pathway and good fertile soil. Naturally, it is an object lesson on the kingdom of God, just as our lesson today is. And Mark's point is that sometimes the seed falls on good ground and takes root. And when it does, it makes a difference in the world. And sometimes the seed - that's the Gospel - doesn't take root.

It lands on the walkway or the stony ground and if it roots, it's shallow and withers quickly. And naturally, that reflects when we try to bring the Gospel to bear on bad

situations and for whatever reasons, folks aren't receptive. It happens. Not everyone wants to receive grace. Sometimes sticking with what you know is much easier.

But as I read that parable of the sower and the seeds last week in light of my own yard struggles, I thought to myself, "Why? Why would you do that? You're just going to have to yank it up later." Looking at it through the eyes of one trying to beat nature into submission, it just irritated me.

As I was thinking of the mustard seed analogy which follows immediately on the heels of the sower parables, it reminded me of a throwaway line I once heard about the problem of mustard seeds – they can quickly turn to noxious weeds.

As Jesus is describing them, they are a wonderful metaphor for faith in our modern understanding. Tiny seed, huge results. To the modern eye, this seems pretty straightforward.

And for those who consider evangelism to be a four-letter word, I suppose there is some comfort in the knowledge that it is God who turns hearts. All the church does is throw seed around, hoping that in its time, it will bloom.

But you know what a weed is: it's anything that is growing where it is not supposed to be. That's why the thistle can be both the national symbol of Scotland and a noxious weed here.

Sometime back, I heard a take on this parable that I haven't been able to get out of my mind. It suggested that our modern understanding of it gets it all wrong. A farmer in Jesus' day might very well have recoiled in horror at the idea of actually *planting* mustard seed.

It could spread like wildfire and choke the intended crop. Indeed, mustard seed could be an early way to indulge in agricultural sabotage against one's business competitors.

Scatter a little mustard seed into the field and before you know it the farmer is spending all his time trying to keep this noxious weed from spreading and taking over the crop.

It would be about like planting kudzu on purpose.

Taken the one way, our modern way, faith seeds are planted and sometime down the road, in God's time, faith blossoms. It sounds so benevolent and kind. It lines up beautifully with Ezekiel's lofty language that, "God's people are towering cedars set on mountaintops."

And yet, taken the other way it is positively subversive. The sower is flinging in this seed that is going to completely upset the orderly rows of produce.

So which is it, the kingdom of God? Is it towering cedars or noxious weeds?

Both.

The truth is that God is always calling for God's people to be those towering cedars of Ezekiel. And yet, "cedars" isn't the only word or analogy that God uses for God's people throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament. God is quite realistic about what exactly can be reasonably expected from the people. And so some of the other analogies from the prophets to describe ancient Israel are just a touch less flattering. Just ahead of the passage we read from Ezekiel this morning, the very same people are described as nymphomaniacs. That's right. The people whom God has called to be faithful to God only are shacking up with every possible other suitor. Later on, in the famous vision in the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter, Ezekiel is shown a valley of dried-up bleached-out bones and it is told that these are the people Israel. Not exactly a nice vision.

Ezekiel is one of the more tastefully restrained prophets – some are a bit less charitable in their description of faithfulness of God’s people. If the virgin Israel is what God wanted, it seems a harlot is what God got.

So the truth is that God is also abundantly aware that the kingdom of God is going to need to rely on some slightly more reliable tactics.

Cedars are well and good, but now and then it takes a noxious weed to get the job done.

I think maybe that is why Jesus used that particular analogy.

You see, God’s expectations of God’s people have always been high.

God has always wanted great things from us.

Indeed, God’s *demands* of God’s people have always been high.

If you read through Mark, you’ll get a taste of what God wants from God’s people.

You see, the expectations didn’t really change when Jesus came.

God has always wanted God’s people to be a force for good in the world. When Jesus came preaching, it was the same message: that God’s people are the change agents to bring about a good future, a more desirable future. The kingdom of God isn’t something to be put off into the conveniently distant future, the kingdom of God is *now*.

Throughout Mark’s gospel narrative, we hear that the kingdom has drawn near. The kingdom is now. The kingdom is before us.

Mark isn’t doing anything new when he says it. Ezekiel said it. Amos said it. Isaiah said it. Go back to the covenant: God said it!

God has always had the hope and the expectation that God’s people are going to be different from the world around them.

And yet, as I noted last week, the hope of the Gospel lies not in the fact that we are always faithful to God's vision – we clearly are not. Indeed, God's people have a demonstrated pattern of failure.

It puts me in mind of that wonderful quotation I gave Anna for the e-news to send to you this week, *“Don't make the world worse. I know that I'm supposed to tell you to aspire to great things. But I'm going to lower the bar here: Just don't use your prodigious talents to mess things up. Too many smart people are doing that already.”*<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, as one reads through the failures of God's people, one wonders if the whole “kingdom of God is a mustard seed” line came from the reality that God decided to lower the bar!

No, the hope of the Gospel does not lie in our faithfulness to God. But it does lie in God's faithfulness to us.

And that is the reality of the kingdom of God. It is unpredictable. It is uncontrollable. It is untamable.

But God never lowers the bar. God never settles for less. What God wants for us and from us is nothing short of our participation in the kingdom of God. What God wants from us and for us is to be a part of God's vision of redemption.

Last week, I asked you to look at your own need for redemption in your life.

This week, I hope you'll think of *where* you have seen redemption in your life.

---

<sup>1</sup>Charles Wheelan's advice to college graduates (from *10 1/2 Things No Commencement Speaker Has Ever Said*, adapted in the Wall Street Journal, April 27).

And from there, when we know how God has worked for redemption in our lives, we can work for the redemption of the world – that is how the kingdom of God is advanced, when grace extended to God’s people becomes grace for the world.

You see, we come here to experience grace.

We come here to see and be reminded of God’s faithfulness to the world.

In the context of worship we may safely confess our sins, know that we are loved and forgiven and hear it. Here in the context of worship, we sing hymns and praise God. We hear sermons and hopefully learn a thing or two. We pray together.

I love gathering together for worship. It connects me to you and us to each other. It gives us time to be with friends.

I wouldn’t trade it for the world. And I believe fundamentally, deeply, that God delights in our worship. God delights when we help each other and care for each other.

But that isn’t all.

The kingdom of God is about more than worship and fellowship. The kingdom of God is about the redemption of the world.

But somewhere our language and our focus changed. The church began to be concerned more with what happens on Sunday morning and worship services ceased to be about praising God and became focused on “saving souls.” I’m not talking about Morningside per se, or really any church per se, but just generally.

Culturally, we got rock-star preachers who built evangelism machines that were as well oiled as a headline event. We built Sunday Schools and financed huge buildings in the twentieth century.

And yet, despite all that enthusiasm, all that energy, the church still shrank.

Somewhere around 1964, to be exact.

You see, from 1945 to 1964, churches grew at an almost exponential rate. That's understandable. The WWII generation came home, bonded as almost no other generation before, and wanted to live their lives with faithfulness and raise their children in the faith. And I don't know, but I have a hunch that this generation who had witnessed fighting and dying, who had waited for loved ones to come home, and gone to work in factories and pulled together wanted more than anything to see the redemption of the world.

But something went wrong somewhere along the way. The year 1964 was the high-water mark.

It's been downhill for American religion since.

If church attendance were the metric of the kingdom of God, it would seem that for generations, the kingdom has been losing ground.

To be sure, Morningside is growing and thriving, but if we measure by numbers, the American church, in the aggregate, is shrinking.

But the kingdom of God is measured in the redemption of the world.

And for what it's worth, I don't believe either that the folks who wandered out of the church in the generations after left because they were horribly disillusioned, or bad people, or didn't want to worship.

My hunch is that folks wandered away from the church then for the same reasons that folks have wandered away from the church now: not because of boredom, or musical taste or lack of it, but because they just didn't see that it really mattered.

I'm sure one or two left angrily over something or the other.

But most just couldn't see that it matters.

How depressing.

But the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Untamable. Unpredictable.

Unstoppable. And it does matter. It matters because it is good news.

So we cannot shrink from our calling. If it's not good news, we've missed the point.

Aesthetics of worship, while important, aren't good news.

Political convictions, while important, aren't the good news either.

And God's people are like the cedars on the mountaintop: visible, present, obvious.

Well, I hope we're obvious. God's people in every age have been charged with being obvious: by spreading grace, relieving suffering, bearing in solidarity, breaking down the walls of hostility. The call never changes.

It all puts me in mind of a poem that I read years ago – I think it has a word for the church today.

Christianity was once an eagle message  
spring from the nest on the highest mountain peak  
on diving wings that glittered.  
But we chastened its bold feathers,  
Competently straightened its cutting beak  
And Lo! It was a blackbird,  
A tame loquacious raven.

Christianity was once a lion gospel  
Always seeking a warm and living prey,  
A young lion of Judah.  
But we clipped its sharp, crooked claws,  
Stilled its thirst for blood of the heart  
And turned it into a purring cottage cat.

Christianity was once a desert sermon,  
Mean sharp as the terrible africanus,  
Burning as the desert sand.  
But we turned it into a garden idyll,  
Mignonettes, asters and pious roses,



A romantic mood in Gethsemane.

Lord, take care of our pious cowardice!  
Give it swift eagle wings and sharp lion's claws!  
Give it scent of wild honey and simoom  
And then say with the Baptist's voice:  
This is the victory that conquers the world.  
This is Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bolander, Nils. *Christianity was Once an Eagle Message* in Divine Inspirations.  
Atwan, Dardess and Rosenthal, eds. P71