

Sermon for Pentecost IV—Year B 2018
The Kingdom is . . . a Weed!?

One of the things I really dislike about gardening is weeding.
Especially trying to weed out a vine that
invades our garden every year.

Back when I was younger
and my knees could take the long hours,
I would work side-by-side with my husband
and try to rid our flower beds of every weed.

Nowadays I just leave this gardening task to Joe.

As the saying goes, plant and your spouse plants with you,
weed and you weed alone.

He doesn't seem to get as discouraged as I do
when the weeds start making their way back
all too soon.

It really does seem to me like it happens over night.

It doesn't really, but it seems that way.

So, yes, I confess, I hate weeding which means . . .

I hate weeds.

What about you?

Do I have any fellow weed-haters out there among you?

Then you feel pain and know my distain.

One avid gardener . . . the author Agatha Christie . . .
once said that a weed is just a plant that is growing
where we don't want it to be.

Well, amen to that!

Did I mention that I hate weeds?

So it was a bit disconcerting to learn this past week that the
mustard plant of today's gospel lesson was—a 1st century weed.
Actually, I think I may have heard that before,
but for some reason it really struck me this past week—
and made me think anew about this well known parable.

Which, if you don't already know this,
is the whole point of the parables.

The gospels tell us that Jesus used parables to teach the people.
In fact someone once said that Jesus told so many parables he
became one himself.

It seems that Jesus uses the parables to create a shift in our
imaginings, a shift in the way we ourselves, God and others.
Actually, is there any aspect of Jesus . . . his words,
his life, his death and resurrection that doesn't shift
how we see ourselves, God and others and so much more?

So since today we are presented with three parables,
it's safe to say that Jesus is intending to overturn and rearrange
and challenge our usual way of looking at things.

Many interpretations and sermons focus on the tiny seed that
grows into something big, which in turn indicates that
our faith or the church can grow from small to large as well.
But a more challenging interpretation focuses on
the mustard seed as a weed and what that implies.

Apparently, mustard seeds, in Jesus' time were considered at the
very least pesky but more often quite dangerous.
That's because wild mustard is incredibly difficult to control
and once it takes root it can take over the entire planting area.

So, with that in mind, let's imagine the scene on the day in which
Jesus spoke these words.

Let's begin first by considering the Ezekiel passage.
Ezekiel paints an image of Israel's future greatness—
the image of a tender sprig planted on a lofty mountain.

Its safe to say that the crowds of faithful Jews
who came to hear Jesus preach and teach
were familiar with that image of God making
them into a mighty cedar
under whose branches every winged creature
would live and nest and flourish.

No doubt they listened with great anticipation when Jesus said,
“With what can we compare the kingdom of God,
or what parable will we use for it?”

anxious and expectant for a majestic image.

Then, when he said it is like the mustard seed that produces
“the greatest of all shrubs” they must have thought,
“Wait. What?”

You should be imagining now every jaw dropping
as the crowd is scandalized and offended,
while one awkward guy in the back begins laughing out loud
before realizing that no one else thinks its funny.

So let’s bring things back to the present.

The kingdom of God is like the invasive vine
that we are forever trying to get rid of in my backyard?

The one that winds its way all over the yard,
year after year and

no matter what we do to get rid of it, it returns.

Hmmm . . . what did I just say.

No matter what we try to do to get rid of it . . . it returns.

Could it be that, like the mustard shrub,

once the kingdom of God takes root it is there to stay?

Actually, one theologian, John Dominic Crossan wrote:
“The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control.... (It’s) something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses – if you could control it.”

Is Jesus proclaiming that the kingdom is not something we can control?
And here is another challenging thought—
Is Jesus saying that the kingdom is definitely not safe, especially if we are satisfied with the way things are or if we are bent on trying to take control of the kingdom.
No the kingdom of God comes to overturn, to take over, and transform the kingdoms of the world.

How does this come about?
Through Jesus’ weedy words . . .
Words that get planted in us, that take hold and begin to bear fruit when our faith is active in love . . . love for others—especially “the least of these.”
Weedy words like—
The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.
Is it lawful to do good or to do harm . . .
To save life or to kill?
Who do you say that I am?
If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.
Whoever wishes to be first among you must be your servant . . .

*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life a ransom for many.*

These are some weedy words indeed.

Words that are hard to hear and that keep invading our lives.

Of course, God invades not only with challenge,
but also with hope, grace and peace which encourage us.
And so since we cannot control the invasion of God's kingdom,
we welcome rather than resist the challenging weedy words,
we welcome the hope-filled ones,
and we let them grow and bear fruit in us for the sake of the world.

Where in our lives is God's kingdom sneaking in,
or spreading out, or taking over?

That's what we need to look for this week.

How do God's weed-like words keep returning
no matter how much you try to resist them?

Where do you see hope sneaking in
to change lives in ways large and small?

How is God growing new life in ways mysterious and profound?

Where is the kingdom of God seeking to invade
to bring abundant life to all, especially the meek and lowly?

Every day, I look out my kitchen window and
I notice the growth of the flowers and shrubs we have planted,
but I also notice the weeds
and wish I had the time and stamina to get rid of them.

But more than that . . . I'll be thinking, too,
about the mystery of the kingdom of God and
of Jesus' weedy words . . .

I pray they take root and invade our lives.

May God bring the growth and help us to say and to live,
"Thy kingdom come."