

“The plant we love to hate”

- Over my life, there has been a specific plant that has been at some points an object of beauty and joy
  - And at other points in my life, a hated and unwelcome thing obnoxiously growing where I do not want it
    - And eye sore
  - It has brought simple pleasures, been an edible part of a meal
    - And has also been extremely frustrating and difficult to remove
  - Of course I am talking about: Dandelions
  - My son Gaius recently highlighted this to me, that over my lifetime my opinions of this amazing plant have changed
  - He is currently at that stage where he enjoys them immensely- he would have a yard full of them
  - He picks the yellow flowers to give to his mother
  - He blows the seeds as we go for our evening dog walk
  - And when they are thick along the road, as they are around a few of the houses nearby
  - He gets a stick and starts swinging just to watch all of the seeds scatter into the wind
  - We do our best to keep him out of other people's yards, but you know how that goes. Not well... that's how it goes. Not well.
  - And honestly the yards full of dandelions are probably the same yards least concerned with a boy and his stick
  - His joy in picking the white fluffy tops and handing them to us to blow on reminds me of when I thought they were best plant ever
  - My brother, rest his soul, used to eat them- some in salads, and some sautéed.
  - They have beautiful yellow flowers, fun seeds, they are edible- what's not to love?
  - And then I remember times in my life much more recently where I have been attempting to have a nice looking yard in a subdivision
  - And those dang plants- they grow faster than grass, and so stick up quickly after you have just mowed

- Sometimes the mower doesn't even cut them- just pushes them over and within a day they pop back up again like nothing happened!
- Their leaves an unwelcome visual break in the smooth, consistent green grass of a proper lawn
- Their seeds blowing in the wind, I could just imagine while watching them just how many more I was going to have in my yard come next year
- And I do not like the way they taste, bitter things- they are weeds
- Sometimes, when I read about mustard seeds, I find it much more helpful to think about dandelions
- And also that there must be a lot of Truth, big T, embedded in these organic, agrarian parables.... a lot to learn
  - A lot to surprise us.
- We are continuing our walk through the early chapters of the gospels
  - Like I mentioned last week, after all of the action over the last 6 months of our church year
  - Now it is time to begin reflecting on what all of it meant
  - And here we are in Mark's gospel again, chapter 4, which is full of parables about seeds, and fruit, and farmers
    - And of course the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God
  - Earlier in this chapter, as a context, Jesus teaches a crowd by the sea
  - And gives them the parable of the seeds being sown on different soils
  - He compares the meaning of these parables to a lamp, which goes on a lamp stand and not hidden under a bushel basket, or under the bed
  - He tells them repeatedly to pay attention
  - At the end of this chapter, Jesus goes on a boat with them, and when the storm comes and scares them all
    - He calms it.
  - The parables in the middle are the ones we hear this morning, the parable of the sower, and of the mustard seed
  - There is always a lot written about parables as complex as these
  - One author write, "Jesus told so many parables that he became one." <sup>1</sup>
  - Parables, as the Greek root *para ballō* suggests, are thrown alongside our lives<sup>2</sup> rather than given as explanations or imperatives

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<sup>1</sup> Don E. Saliers, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 3 Pastoral Perspective, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 140

<sup>2</sup> Nibs Stroupe Wray, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 3 Homiletical Perspective, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 141

- We have to dance with them, mull them over, allow them to speak deeply into our heart and our subconscious before getting truth from them
- And then it is often multiple truths that emerge
- We start with Jesus telling us about a farmer who haphazardly threw some seeds on the ground
- Then would sleep and rise- basically living life forgetting about them
- And yet they grow. And he does not know how, because he certainly hasn't been tending them
- Yet the earth seems to produce with and without us
- It is automatic, as another way of translating it, and funny enough Mark is the only gospel writer to include this little tidbit.<sup>3</sup>
- There is a paradox here, that while the Kingdom of God needs us, and God deeply- more than anything- wants us to a part of it
  - And even has work for us to do in it
- And it will come with or without us, and it is not contingent upon us, and we cannot stop it by not participating
- It is true both at the same time that God's kingdom is not complete without each of us, and yet none of us are essential to its growing
- And yet it seems that the grower, who has been absent all along, still gets the reap the fruit of those seeds
- Truly, if there is a deep truth here, perhaps it is that God is inviting us into something so much bigger than ourselves
- That we can be a part of it but cannot take credit for it. And that will happen even if we decide we don't want it.
- Jesus barely takes a breath before saying that the Kingdom of God is also like a mustard seed
  - I know it is dense and we have spent a lot of time here, but we have to go a little further and then I want to end this sermon with perhaps not so much as a a conclusion
  - But with, in true parable fashion, a couple of truths that I want you to walk along side of, and ponder
  - The mustard seed...
  - When sown is the smallest seed, but grows up and become the greatest of all shrubs
  - With branches so large that birds can nest

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Hoch Wray, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 3 Exegetical Perspective, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 143

- It was generally accepted by the culture of the time that the mustard seed was the smallest, at least it symbolized the smallest seed<sup>4</sup>
- And Jesus contrasts it with the large shrub it can become
- This would have been a strange thing for Jesus to say, for few people desired to grow mustard
- And who would want birds in their fields- they eat the thing you are trying to grow. We have scarecrows to achieve the opposite
- By human standards and in the culture of the time, this defies any reasonable human farming goal or desire
- One would rather grow grain, or grapes, or olives, or even talk about the big cedars of Lebanon
  - Which by the way were referenced by many ancient cultures beyond the Hebrew Scriptures
- I remember one preacher even suggesting that mustard seeds can find their way into good seed if you are not careful
- And you end up planting them in your garden accidentally and it's very frustrating
- So we have an inattentive farmer who reaps the rewards of seeds scattered but not tended
- We have tiny, unwelcome seeds growing where they are not wanted and are not useful
- And the whole thing is perplexing, isn't it?
- It is complicated, as any good parable should be, and perhaps not unlike my feelings about dandelions
- And complicated may be ok for today
  - I am going to avoid reducing these parables into bite-sized truths and instead pull out just a few things we can take away
  - And which we can continue to ponder
  - That's my goal today: no easy answers, just more to think about
  - I find in these parables, and even in the passage from Ezekiel about the cedar trees,
  - A reminder that a fundamental and unavoidable part of this life we live, both our lives in this world, and our lives of faith in God's Kingdom
  - A fundamental part of it... is change itself.
  - I think back to this parish two years ago before the pandemic, to myself two years ago, and you can look back too
  - Go back 10 years and look

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<sup>4</sup> Soards, Marion, ed., Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B After Pentecost 1, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 63

- We are not the same now, and we will not go back to what was, only go forward to what will be now, to the new
- I have read article after article about the post-pandemic church... and all of them emphasize that it will be a different church now
- There is no old normal to return to- we have set sail into uncharted waters, and that is true here at St. Michael's
- There is only moving forward, only a new thing that God is creating going forward.
- Change is built in to everything that God creates and continues to create
- Change is so fundamental to everything, and is at the base of all of this parables about growing things
- That change is so intertwined with God's handiwork, that I wonder if it is perhaps a reflection of a part of God's self
- What would it mean if God is by nature a God of change? A God of process? Of growth? <sup>5</sup>
- That what we are reassured of and promised is that there will definitely and unavoidably be change
- AND no matter what that change brings, God will be there with us because God is the God of change
- God rules over the change and the chaos.
- God will be there to nurture whatever grows through the change
- And if we can shift our hearts to learning how to be surprised at the mustard plants and dandelions that come our way
- Rather than being focused on creating perfect fields and yards
- We might catch a glimpse of what God is working on in us and around us
- Living this life of faith is tilling the ground and not knowing what will grow
- Embracing the unexpected and surprising
- No longer fearing the change and unknown - "Fear not!"
- And trusting God that wherever we are led, to whatever we may become
  - God will be there, loving who we become, and calling us to become even more.
- Maybe we can start enjoying the dandelions again

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://courtney.substack.com/p/there-is-no-going-back>