

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton WI
June 16, 2024
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
Mark 4:26-34: Grace

Holy God, whose works are greater than our wildest imagination and most sophisticated study, scatter the seed of your Word among us today, and let each of us welcome the good news you would plant within us. May our lives be the fertile ground in which your love bursts into life. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Poets pay deep attention to the world around them. They see past the surface of things. Ordinary people might look at a chestnut and see just that—a chestnut. But a poet has the ability to behold a poem in that chestnut, to imagine a whole world tucked in their palm.

The great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda made a practice of writing odes to ordinary things. He composed odes to artichokes and onions, tomatoes and books. He even wrote an ode to laziness—a great poem to read on the Sabbath. One particularly lovely ode addresses the lowly chestnut:

“Out of the bristling foliage
you fell
complete:
polished wood,
glistening mahogany,
perfect
as a violin that has just
been born in the treetops
and falls
offering the gifts locked inside it...”

Neruda turned a chestnut into a violin—and a poem. Instead of tossing the fallen chestnut aside, he paid attention.

A chestnut transformed into a poem, a mustard seed transfigured into a parable.

Our scripture today is about the Kingdom of God. That phrase - Kingdom of God - plays an incredibly central role in Jesus's ministry. It comes from the Greek word, *basilea* - a noun that is tricky to translate into English. Sometimes it's rendered as the Realm of God, or even the kin-dom of God, in an attempt to soften the patriarchal edges, and perhaps also to lessen the discomfort of the democratically minded. Few modern Americans crave citizenship in any kind of Kingdom, even a divine kingdom. I confess I rather love the phrase - in part because *basilea* is actually a feminine noun.

There's something delightfully subversive about Jesus, the Son of God, preaching and teaching about the feminine kingdom of God. This hidden complexity completely fits with the perpetually scandalous gospel, in which everything you'd expect is flipped inside out and upside down. True to form, even when talking about a kingdom, Jesus doesn't direct us to consider the big and bombastic; he presses us to perceive the tiny and humble.

Seeds are small, but seeds are not insignificant. Within a seed a whole life is contained. After all, the gift locked inside the chestnut that fell to rest by Pablo Neruda's feet is not merely a lovely ode. The chestnut contains the potential to grow into a mighty tree. Indeed, a single chestnut might eventually beget generations of trees. The potential of a seed is infinite and sacred.

Jesus' capacity to behold that infinite and sacred potential was one of his most remarkable qualities - and his vision wasn't limited to parables. He lived out the metaphor in the way he lived and moved and had his being. I'm thinking especially about his tendency to hang out with least valued members of society. He broke bread with tax collectors, cozied up to lepers, welcomed children, and conversed with women.

Jesus didn't hang out with those people because he pitied them. He didn't call out their imperfections and scamper back to the safety of respectable society.

He spent time with them, delighting in their unique company. Jesus reached out to ordinary, broken people because he saw beyond their role as outcasts and outlaws. He recognized their inherent value. He perceived their sacred and infinite potential.

For the record, it was incredibly weird for Jesus to say that "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that when it has grown becomes the greatest of all shrubs." Nadia Bolz-Weber jokes, "What kind of off-brand kingdom is this? It's like saying someone is the smartest of all the idiots or the mightiest of all baby dolls." Mustard was considered an invasive weed. And yet Jesus looked at a mustard seed and saw the sparrows that would one day nestle in its shade.

In the same way, Jesus met workaday fishermen and saw Disciples. He regarded people of questionable character and trusted that the Holy Spirit would transform them into faithful bearers of the good news. He encountered people whose bodies, minds, and spirits were overcome by illness or overrun by demons, and refused to see them as anything less than human beings worthy of dignity and love. Again, Jesus perceived their sacred and infinite potential. Because of this, everywhere he went people were drawn to him, compelled by his merciful love and faithful imagination.

And so the Kingdom of God grows. God coaxes forests out of brittle seeds. And God's redeeming love releases God's children from suffering and isolation, and recasts us as citizens of the Kingdom of God. When we keep our eyes peeled for seeds of the Kingdom, the humble beginnings to the great things our God will accomplish are everywhere.

Just waiting to be nurtured into maturity by the Spirit.

Here's a story of a small seed that bore great fruit. Several years ago I baptized an older woman who had never, in all her years, been a part of a church. She was curious. She longed for community and communion. She believed in God and, through independent study of scriptures, had come to faith in Christ. But she just couldn't quite get past her apprehension about actually going to church. In the course of our

conversations to prepare for her baptism, she told me about the first time she went to worship. She sat alone, positively marinating in discomfort and uncertainty. A woman approached her in the pews, placed a hand on her shoulder, and encouraged her to come again. As she described the woman who welcomed her, my wheels started spinning and my heart was warmed. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt who it was. The woman who had welcomed her had been one of the pillars of the community - a woman whose legacy was as towering as a Chestnut tree. One of the things she was known for was personally encouraging guests and visitors to come back. Soon after this encounter she had died unexpectedly - before she could learn that this particular invitation to return had been accepted.

Small seed, great fruit.

Friends, we can do the same. But not alone. Never alone. God will take our small and humble offerings and transform them into pillars of God's Kingdom.

Yes, seeds are small and vulnerable. And yes, there is great work to be done. But at the end of the day, you and I don't make the seed grow. At the end of the day, it is out of our hands. Even a warm embrace from a welcoming woman was just a seed, cultivated into flourishing by the creative power of the Holy Spirit.

And then there's that other seedy parable: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." I love this little passing acknowledgement of his hapless ignorance. He does not know how the seed grows. The literal answer is rain and sun and soil - the same good stuff that makes June burst into bloom. The theological answer is also true: It's grace. Grace is the gift locked inside the parable. Grace is what turns a mustard seed into a plant sprawling with branches. Grace is what transforms a small gesture of welcome into a baptism into the faith and family of Jesus Christ. Grace is what made an extraordinary community of faith - a church with a radically open door - emerge from the dreams and hard work of the founders of First Congregational Church. Grace is what brings families back from

the brink of rupture. Grace is what brings healing when everything has in fact broken beyond repair. Grace is what stubbornly insists that the least and the lost are equally beloved in the eyes of God. Grace is the bedrock of the glorious *basilea* of God. It all goes back to grace.

Another poem, this one by the Kentucky farmer, Wendell Berry.

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.

May it be so. Amen.