

Ezekiel 17:22-24 ~ Mark 4:26-34

Together We Grow

4th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Ordination/Installation of Church Officers ~ June 16, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

Who loves to go to the beach, or to the banks of a river for fun? Yes, you anglers, I know your minds went immediately to fishing. I invite all of you to visualize your favorite beach or lake or river or ocean. Can you catch a whiff of the water? The sand in your toes? This text I am about to read we find ourselves alongside the Sea of Galilee, in that mystical space where land and water meet. This is the setting where Mark treats us to a luminous, full palate of parables about the kingdom of God. We will jump in toward the end of these teachings at verse 26, but this seaside teaching section actually began back at verse 1.

Multiple stories by Jesus, in which, brush stroke by brush stroke combine to create a colorful, relatable picture of the Kingdom of God. We will see in his final two parables perhaps a good deal of green, and maybe some yellow. Spoiler alert: the first one is *not* the one about the Sower and the Seed that are sown on different types of ground. *Nor* is the second one about a mustard seed, the one about faith as small as a mustard seed being able to move a mountain. Listen carefully for what they *are* about. These stories are *very* short. If you look away or let your attention wander, you will miss them.

Let us open our ears and hearts, perhaps even close our eyes and imagine ourselves on the shore beside the sea, as we listen for what Jesus has to teach us today.

Sermon:

Raise your hand if you are a "grown-up." This is *not* a trick question. At the moment, I'm just talking literally: have you, unlike the children who came up for Discovery Time, already reached your full height? Of course, those of us homo sapiens bi-peds who have already enjoyed the blessing of walking this earth for six decades or more, may have started shrinking a bit (*hands?*) And at the same time, our feet may have gone up a shoe size or more. Isn't gravity: is a wonderful thing? Really. Ask astronauts or others who aspire to adapt to living in outer space at zero gravity. Our bodies were made for gravity, surely.

And just as surely, our bodies stop growing at some point in our young adulthood. We reach a certain height, and then we are done with getting taller. Whether we like it or not. Our younger daughter, Hannah, always thought surely, she would reach at least my height, since her older sister is a couple of inches taller than I. But Hannah grew to 5 feet and 3 inches and stopped. About three inches shorter than I am. (Or than I used to be.) Our bodies grow taller and then they stop. Same thing with going to school: no matter how long we keep going to school, college, trade school, at some point, we stop. We have earned every certificate and degree that we intended to. And we are done with school.

So, if our bodies stop growing at some point, and our years of attending school eventually come to an end, you may wonder (especially the kiddos in the room) why do grownups keep going to church week after week for our whole lives? Even in the summer! Really, how many times do you need to hear sermons about these seed parables? Isn't there some point where our spirits have learned all that God wants to teach us? Isn't there some point where we know how "to do Jesus"? How to love others and ourselves, as God loves us? Surely, after so many years of going to church, praying, living our faith, we would have this love and justice thing down pat. Just how long does God, the arborist and the gardener, have to keep cultivating us before the fruit of the spirit ripens? You know that one fruit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Galatians 5:22) Yup, that one.

We know the answer: Spiritual growing. It takes a lifetime, at least, to become Christ's hands and feet, eyes, and mouth here on this earth. It takes time to grow into embodied love, fierce love, working to right all that is wrong with this world, and within ourselves, day by day, branch by branch. That's *one* of the reasons we keep coming here week after week, year after year, long after we have reached our full height and earned all the degrees and certificates, we think we need. Of course there's also the choir, the bells, the heavenly Low Brass Ensemble, and the free coffee.

Maybe that's why we keep hearing about trees throughout our entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Starting with the Garden of Eden all the way to the Tree of life. The Word of God is infused with the metaphor of God as gardener and arborist. In our first reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, we see God as arborist: taking a sprig from a lofty cedar to restore Judah, growing a new tree from the old. These words were written to God's people as they were living through and after the decisive moment in 587 BCE when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar and they were exiled as captives in Babylon. You can see how Jesus took an image his audience already knew from Ezekiel and added his twist: not a noble cedar, but a humble mustard bush. Remember the story of Mary Magdalene weeping at the empty tomb on Easter morning in the garden, supposing Jesus to be the gardener, rather than the Risen Christ. But if you think about it, she wasn't completely mistaken. God as arborist, Christ as gardener, all the way through to the Tree of Life bringing healing to the nations in last chapter of Revelation.

Did you know that Peggy Fornefelt came up with the marvelous idea that we should plant two lilac plants on either side of the walkway leading into our Labyrinth church, in memory of her mom, Margie Fornefelt, dearly beloved member of FPC for 89 years, who passed on almost exactly three years ago today? And so we did. We planted two lilacs watered them, mowed around them. One lived and one died. Gil Nimm dutifully replanted a new one in the place of the one that died. Both plants continued to receive equal care. Guess what happened? The same thing! The original lilac continued to thrive, the newly replanted one in time proceeded to wilt and die. Undaunted, Gil replanted now a third lily in the same spot. Only to have it succumb as the first two had done. Next time, he will try a new spot, nearer its hearty and healthy, yet bereaved for a third time, cousin.

What makes a plant grow? Why is one taller than another? Why does one grow another die? Well, we know. And we don't know. As Jesus parable today teaches us: it is not all up to us. We do our part, but it is God who gives the growth, not us. A humbling and empowering truth, all at once. Perhaps you are familiar with the *Frog and Toad* series of wonderful children's stories by Arnold Lobel. One of his tales reminds me of this very parable. In it, Frog gives Toad some flower seeds to plant. He promises that toad will have a garden "quite soon," but cautions him that gardening is "very hard work." Toad proceeds to plant the seeds, then promptly commands them: "Now seeds start growing." They do not. Toad repeats the order more and more loudly. Frog tells Toad his seeds are *not* growing because Toad's shouting frightens them. He counsels Toad to "leave them alone" and let the sun and rain do their work.

Toad, however, hears only that his seeds are afraid, and undertakes a series of day-by-day moves to calm his seeds and cajole them into growing. He sets out candles at night, since they might also be afraid of the dark. He reads his seeds stories, sings them songs, plays music for them. (All these are actions that might calm *him* if he were afraid.) After many days of endless toil, Toad finally collapses in utter exhaustion. Frog returns for a visit to find the seedlings well above ground, and Toad sound asleep. Frog awakens Toad to the news that his garden is finally growing. Toad is, of course, very pleased, but admits: "You were right, Frog. It was very hard work."

Definitely Toad did work hard, but his hard work had nothing to do with the seeds beginning to grow. This is truly a great story for all ages (including grown-ups). It points right to Jesus' parable, teaching us that all that any of us can do is help to prepare the possibilities for growth, to nurture and foster that growth whether or not it happens.¹ I take courage and hope in Jesus' teaching in these two parables. All good things of God's kingdom start small and grow over time. More often than not, mysteriously. Moving according to God's timing and not ours. Becoming what God intends, perhaps not what we originally expected.

Like how raising a couple hundred dollars to purchase Bibles for our children, years ago planted the seed of the first FPC rummage sale that has grown and grown into the wonderful community-wide effort many of you contributed countless hours of work and boxes of donations. (*Show of hands*) Like how a few people coming to our church asking to borrow a wheelchair, a walker, and a shower chair, has grown into the Medical Equipment Loan Closet ministry, now with 200 pieces of medical equipment being loaned monthly to over 100 individuals every month. To anyone who needs it. Or Soup or Socks, food and clothing pantry, that began in the basement of FPC over thirty years has grown to quite a bush: providing 34,020 meals in 2023, and has expanding its clothing provision into Best First Day, Best Snow Day, a Diaper bank.

As Pam Smith preached last week, becoming like Christ is a slow process. Seeing how faith grows and matures into action takes time. Like the growth of a tree or a bush, A flower or a vegetable: It is mysterious. God's call can catch us by surprise. Like when Moses was on the lam, tending his father-in-law's flock of sheep one slow day, and saw a bush burning oddly. Or like the Rev. Dr. Janet Wolfe, who might have turned into a professor of Political Science. But for the

day she was playing the organ by herself in the chapel at the University of Colorado and someone ran in to tell her there was a bush on fire from a spark of the nearby fraternity's incinerator. This was her sign from God, to go to seminary and become a pastor. God only knows all the ways that Janet's ministry (both formal and informal) has spread the kingdom of God over the years. A mighty spark of compassion and justice all the way down.

Not every one of us has been given a burning bush as a sign like Moses or Janet. God speaks in sprigs and seeds, shouts and whispers, storms and sunshine: using all the colors of the rainbow. The four folks we are about to ordain today have each heard God's call in unique and marvelous ways to serve as Elders and Deacons, for a time such as this. Each of them has said, "yes," I choose to believe the God who raised Jesus from the dead, who takes a sprig from the old to grow something new. I choose to believe and to act according to the One who keeps growing us from small starts and small things into bushes and trees for the expansion of God's kingdom on earth. Trees and humble bushes that shelter and shade, protect and feed all of God's creation. To go out on a limb, to provide for others. Beloved Community of FPC, together we can grow God's kingdom on earth.

ⁱ Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad Together* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1971), p.29, as told by David J. Schlafer in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, Editors Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, Sharp, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2021), p. 87.