

Cedars and Noxious Weeds

We are at war with the ivy next door. It grows through our fence.

It's a solid fence.

I once read the definition of a weed is something that is planted where it's not supposed to be.

Every time we walk down the sidewalk beside our house, we pinch off ivy and throw it back over the fence.

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

Immediately prior to this week's Gospel lection in Mark is 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 live the way we do.

But as I read that parable in light of my own yard struggles, I think 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 their time trying to keep this noxious weed from spreading and choking out 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 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 – to put it delicately – promiscuous. The people whom God has called to be faithful to God *only* are having their heads turned by every possible other suitor. Later on, in the famous vision in the 37th 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 – and Ezekiel is one of the more tastefully restrained prophets – some are even less charitable in their description of faithfulness of God's people.

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.

Jesus isn't doing anything new when he says that. 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, 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 Charles Wheelan's wonderful admonition to recent graduates, *"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."*¹

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.

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.

Do you see a need for redemption in your life?

Or have you, perhaps, already seen it?

When we experience God's redemption, then 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.

We all need in this life to experience grace.

¹Charles 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).

We exist to see and be reminded of God's faithfulness to the world.

In Christian community, 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 can't wait to be back together again soon.

What's more, 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.

The prophets spoke out when God's people had lost their way.

The gospel speaks out when the church has lost its way.

It's easy to major in minors, to get hung up on what *we* get out of church.

It's probably the greatest temptation of faith these days, in a consumeristic world, to concentrate on what *we* get out church.

It smacks of "What have you done for me lately."

But that's not the only thing that can derail us – again, I ask, what needs redemption these days, for you? For the world?

Because the kingdom of God is about redemption.

It's like a mustard seed. Untamable. Unpredictable. Unstoppable. And it does matter. It matters because it is good news.

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 *good news* either.

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

Well, at least I hope we're obvious. That's what God calls us to do: to be Captain 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
sprung 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.²

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

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