

Wild Thing
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – June 16, 2024

Please Read:
Ezekiel 17:22-24
Mark 4:26-34

I know the first thing that comes to mind for many of you when you hear “Wild Thing” is the Troggs 1968 hit song, “Wild thing, you make my heart sing, You make everything...” or maybe what comes to mind is the classic children’s book by Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are...* but that’s not exactly where I’m going this morning!

Today we continue to move into the summer season of the church called Ordinary time, when we focus on Jesus’ teachings and what it means to order our lives around his values and commandments. But most of Jesus’s teachings are not commandments or rules. In fact, Jesus’ pedagogical device of choice is *parables*.

In our gospel text for today we hear Jesus saying things like, “The Kingdom of God *is as...*” or the Kingdom of God “*is like...*” The word parable in the Greek literally means “cast alongside...” So Jesus uses images in order to teach spiritual truths about who God is and what it looks like when relationships and life are aligned with God’s priorities and preferences. Imagination is required, because Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is *like* this or that. It’s not the same as this or that, but it’s *like* that. So we have to use our imagination and wonder a bit about how the Kingdom of God is like the images and stories Jesus uses...

But the first thing we must note is that Jesus is not teaching about the Church. He is teaching about “the Kingdom of God.” What do you think of when you hear, “the Kingdom of God”? It’s worth pondering... Because from the outset, we must clarify that the Kingdom of God and the Church *are not the same thing!*

Sadly, we in the church have collapsed the Kingdom of God into the Church (or reduced it to the Church) as though it is ours to define. In fact, Jesus rarely talked about the Church, and I must say the institutional church, or even the mystical holy catholic church, is still a much smaller enterprise than the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is universal, expansive, and I believe a reality not limited even by our most generous conceptions of the Church. The Church has domesticated the Kingdom of God beyond all recognition of what Jesus was describing.

While church is a finite religious entity, our purpose in the church is to point to the Kingdom of God, which is an infinite universal ideal toward which God is moving

all Creation. We in the church are not only to *point to* the Kingdom of God, we are to *embody* the ideals and vision of the Kingdom of God. Summaries of how the Kingdom of God is realized, include loving God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, loving our neighbors as ourselves, loving our enemies and seeking to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. The Kingdom of God is where we forgive others as we have been forgiven. The Kingdom of God is where all people “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly” with their God...etc.

When you consider parables like the Good Samaritan, Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God transcends racial, religious, political or national tribalism. In other words, the Kingdom of God is not merely the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Episcopal, or Methodist, or Baptist, or Pentecostal church. Rather the other way around. I would suggest the holy Catholic (or universal) Church does not have proprietary rights to the Kingdom of God. We can work to realize the Kingdom of God alongside our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other committed religious folk. Ironically, I think you could also argue we are called to work to realize the Kingdom of God alongside agnostics and atheists.

I was reminded of how important it is to make this distinction between the church and the Kingdom of God during our trip last weekend to Cary, North Carolina. We were there for the memorial service of Kim’s sister, but with all the preparations made, we had time to do some culture touring. We visited a couple of Hindu temples located just a few minutes from our hotel. Both visits reminded me what a gift, and how important, basic hospitality is. We were strangers entering into a different religious world, and the people who welcomed us were so kind and helpful, wanting to share with us some basic ideas of Hinduism and to have a visit that was meaningful for us. One of the key teachings that resonated with me, for example, is that part of Hindu practice is to strive to see the divine in all people, and to honor and respect others because God is in them.

Now we Christians might say it differently, but we believe something very similar: We believe that everyone has been created with the *imago dei*. We believe all people are created “in the image of God.” The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians, that God “is Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

It requires humility to acknowledge the difference between the church and the Kingdom of God, and to accept the fact that Jesus was talking about something much bigger, more mysterious and universal, than the church, a vision of community that includes people from every tribe and nation, in fact a vision of God’s love and respect

for all people, even people who are very different than we and who practice their faith with different words and customs.

Jesus teaches first that, “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.”

There are many truths to be gleaned from this simple teaching, that spiritual life requires planting of seeds, that it grows and is fruitful in ways that we do not always control or understand. The previous parable from last week was about the Sower and different types of soil into which the seed is planted. Today’s parables emphasize the fact that growth comes not from human effort, but organically and “automatically.” The NRSV translates the Greek *automate* in verse 28 as “of itself.” The reign of God, Jesus says, is like that. We may scatter seeds, but the growth comes from God, while we “sleep and rise night and day.”

Jesus notes that a little bit can go a long way. Spiritual vitality and transformative power is not about quantity, about size and measures that might be relevant in other worldly domains. The spiritual life is different. Small is beautiful, as when Jesus talks about being salt and light in the world. A little faith, a little love, a little grace can make an asymmetrical impact.

A little kindness goes a long way, and we experienced that kindness from our Hindu neighbors in Cary. I’m not sure what we expected to find, but we were treated as honored guests, and were left feeling like, surely, these are people who have the love of God in them. Like the proverbial birds of the air, we found rest and refreshment in the Hindu community, simply through their welcome and desire to share some of who they were with us.

But there’s something else important here around the quality of the mustard seed. Jesus probably had in mind the reading from Ezekiel. In Ezekiel we read how a small sprig from the mighty Cedar tree will grow into a noble cedar, and every kind of bird will live in its shade...

Most middle eastern farmers would find Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed ridiculous, because the mustard seed is a weed and spreads wildly. It is invasive, pervasive, blown by the wind. And once the mustard plant takes root, it takes over with wild unpredictability. It cannot be controlled. I think Jesus chooses the mustard seed as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God because of this quality of unpredictability. David Lose says God’s reality, God’s reign, the Kingdom of God is

like the mustard plant. It's beyond our control. God's reality "invades, overturns, and eventually overcomes the old one. It's definitely not safe, not, that is, if we're even minimally satisfied with the way things are."

So you see, there is this surprising subversive quality to the mustard seed. As small as it is, it has transformative powers. It may seem like a weed, but it is also beautiful and life-giving in its own time. This gives me hope, as when we look at human nature, there is a confounding mix of the good, the bad, and the ugly, if we're honest. But God can use it all for good. God can bless the birds who need shade with the robust weed of the mustard seed. It's not either/or, but both/and...

Paradox lies at the heart of the Kingdom of God. Maybe that is why in the Gospels Jesus tells such enigmatic parables to explain God's reality? The tension of living with paradox in the parables—as well as paradox in our own lives—unsettles us, keeps us guessing, pushes us off balance. Perhaps the best we can do is learn acceptance, and recite the Serenity Prayer over and over... "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"?

One last thought... Have you heard of the Wild Church movement? I am intrigued by the language they use... *Wild Churches are emerging all the time, offering invitations to reconnect with the natural world. As kin. As sacred. As beloved co-participants in a larger story of grace and inter-being. Wild Church gatherings offer opportunities for contemplation, grief and praise, movement and song, solo wandering and wondering, advocacy, ecological restoration and activism on behalf of and in collaboration with the beloved others in our watersheds.*

Life can be unpredictable, dangerous, fraught with risk and hazards... Maybe we need God's reign to overcome us, to spread like wildfire in and through us, and we might be a part of the change we desire for our world through loving, forgiving, giving and doing justice with wild abandon. I don't normally think of the Lord I serve, or the Kingdom of God to which I am committed to realize as a "wild thing," but maybe I need to let go of status quo, quid pro quo, tame, churchy, traditional, domesticated religion, and walk more on the wild side with Jesus... That would make my heart sing... that would make everything...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.