

Pentecost 3, Proper 6-Year B

June 13, 2021

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Psalms 92:1-4, 11-14

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13], 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

There is something about a great tree. For those of you who have been out to our place, you know that Doug and I have a couple of great old white pines in our yard that provide wonderful shade and, well, are just fun to look up at. Birds take refuge in them. The wind blows through the great boughs of pine needles and makes that lovely 'whispering pine' sound. And we have a lot more trees all over the property: poplar, maple, birch, oak, spruce, fir, cherry.

And now we have even more trees! On Friday we closed on a large parcel of land across from us that was logged off last summer. It went up for sale, and we really didn't want it, but we didn't want it developed; and the owner was starting to make plans to subdivide and develop if he couldn't sell it. We had a nest egg from the sale of our house in Boscawen, which we were planning to either pay down our mortgage some or to build a barn, but alas, we needed to save some land. We saved 151 acres! We are, as they say, 'land rich, cash poor'! Indeed, we have many more trees now.

Well, all of this is just a way to talk about trees and bushes which appears in the Ezekiel lesson and the gospel lesson. Most of Ezekiel is doom and gloom prophecies against the nation of Israel for their unfaithfulness to God, but in this passage we hear a hopeful prophecy. Ezekiel and other prophets often compare a great nation, Israel or others, to a mighty tree. It was a common metaphor for a strong and powerful nation. The reference to birds taking refuge in the branches speaks to the people of the nation and their security in the tall and powerful tree.

When Jesus then tells the story of the mustard seed and bush, this must have appeared odd to his listeners. What happened to a mighty tree? How could a simple bush be a sign of the kingdom of God. What sort of a teaching and parable was this? You will note how at the end of this reading, Luke tells us how Jesus was always teaching in parables.

So why parables? Why didn't he just lay it out plainly for folks? What is it about parables that became his primary *modus operandi*? Well, think about it. When we are just given the answers straight out, we have less to contemplate and consider, less to mull over and ponder. Jesus, being very much in the tradition of a good wisdom teacher, wanted his followers to engage thoughtfully. And, of course, we need to remember our spiritual development was not about how to build homes or bridges, or how to bake a cake, or how to learn multiplication tables. This was about soul work that each of us has to do to follow in his way. By using parables he causes his followers to sort of chew over his words and ideas and to contemplate meaning.

The image of the kingdom of God coming from a small seed and growing into a large bush just wouldn't have had the same familiar caché as a large powerful tree--like the great cedars we hear so much about in the Old Testament and in this passage of Ezekiel. This would have made them contemplate the kingdom in a very different way. A bush, though still with branches, and providing some cover for birds, is much lower to the ground, sways more with the wind, is less strong and stable and so is more fragile.

Now compare that with the traditional image of a large and powerful tree that stands for the nation. Of course, you remember how Jesus was always being pushed by some followers to proclaim that he was the Messiah and was sent to throw off the Romans and reestablish the great nation of Israel, but he is always talking about a different kind of kingdom—the kingdom of heaven.

So, does this parable about the mustard bush begin to make sense in the context of his teaching? Where is the surprise? Where is the 'Aha!'?

Do you have your own parables that life has taught you about beauty, truth, kindness, and the love of God?

A Parable: The kingdom of God is like.....a rose garden. [story of yesterday in Hartford with Charles and Andrew, walking their dogs and viewing a large rose garden in a park]. A man walked his dog around a park everyday. In the middle of the park was a beautiful rose garden. He always thought it was beautiful. One day he ran into the gardener and complimented him on his rose garden. The gardener asked if he had gone inside the garden. The man said he had not. "Ah," the gardener said, "You have seen the garden, but you haven't experienced the garden."

A well-tended rose garden is a site to behold---so many colors and varieties, climbing roses, bush roses, old varieties, newly developed varieties. If they are something you can drive by or walk by, you can still enjoy the color, but you are not getting the full effect. To really understand this 'kingdom' you need to walk in among them and study the different blossoms, the nature of their leaves, the danger of their thorns, but most especially, you get a whole different understanding and appreciation when you are close enough to smell the delicious fragrances. This takes time and attention.

In a good rose garden you can walk around and catch some fragrance in the air, but it is much better to humbly bend over and draw a blossom to your nose and gently sniff. Ah yes, you need to bend over and lower yourself -- there you will find the kingdom. Yes, you need to 'stop and smell the roses' in order to understand the kingdom. I know, kinda corny, but really, stop and think about this as parable or metaphor for living in tune with the divine.

At times it feels like our whole culture is cascading toward ever-increasing frenetic activity, and activity that is more and more centered on the self. I think part of this is growing in my awareness because I'm getting older and newer and newer technologies are taking over and I'm feeling left behind---and I'm kinda OK with that! And part of this is because I see how this fast-paced world is eating at the soul of generations coming after,

and how it is contributing to the bitter, rancorous, 'me first' thinking and debate so pervasive in our culture today. What if, before we got into debate with someone, or before we raced off to do something, or before we checked our email, texts, or social media, we had a little ritual of literally stopping to smell a rose and share that with someone.

What 'rose' do you have to share with the world? What grace-filled moment might you inspire with another? And then, being grounded in that rose-filled love, how will you take that into the world around you to bring healing to the sick, reconciliation to those in conflict, food and drink for those in need, shelter for the homeless. You, dear friends, are God's bouquet!