

Lectionary 11 – Sundays after Pentecost  
June 17, 2018  
Ezek. 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34

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### Like a Tree

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some of you already have heard that Marie and I have begun a long process of building up the soil on five leased acres of her parents' land in South Haven, Michigan. A few of you will have seen the picture I posted on Facebook last week of me in a tractor pulling a disc harrow over that field. I am learning how to be a farmer! And, no, we aren't moving there. We're just playing.

As we work that field, we decided to begin with a disc harrow because these implements disturb only a couple of inches of soil. By discing, we preserve the oxygen exchange processes of the soil while incorporating weeds and other material into it. We're now sowing a mix of pasture seeds as a cover crop. Some components of that mix, like alfalfa, will loosen and enhance the clay in that field. Timothy grass will store carbohydrates. Clover fixes nitrogen. Rye assists with erosion control.

In addition to practicing minimal tillage and soil building, we want to develop the field as an example of a polyculture in a place that is filled with fields containing only one type of plant. Corn, soybeans, apple trees, blueberries, and so on are each planted in huge fields. Creating fields with a diversity of species serves a number of helpful functions for our planet. But the particular diversity that came to mind as I considered today's texts concerns trees and bushes. Ezekiel offers a poem about God's care and provision using the metaphor of a cedar tree. Our Lord does a similar thing using the mustard seed and the small annual bushy plant it produces. And both images lead to a place where many species may dwell alongside one another—a part of our vision for our field too.

And, no, Jesus doesn't misunderstand botany here. He is simply using irony. The cross, ironically, is a kind of tree of life like that described in Ezekiel. After the trip out west last year, I would probably call on my memories of the giant Sequoias if I were to try to come up with an apt metaphor or parable. Mark defers to the lowly mustard seed.

The story in Mark challenges us: "So, you want a cosmic tree that holds up the sky and shelters all the birds of the air? It is hidden in the odd shape of a wooden cross." What is small and considered of little use and perhaps a cause of concern (or great fear, as in the case of the cross—an instrument of torture) can become the centerpiece of life and faith.

But back to that field. We have already planted 20 some rose bushes and about 20 trees. In coming weeks, we will plant another hundred or so tree seedlings of various

kinds—plum, cherry, serviceberry, flame maple, dogwood, hazelnut, etc. They will provide a windbreak for the field, located 2 miles from Lake Michigan, as well as—for many of them—useful fruits and nuts.

Trees and bushes have been much on our minds of late. So hearing biblical stories about them is inspiring and relevant.

Our Lord speaks of the mustard seed as becoming a shrub that shelters the birds. I find it difficult to imagine such a thing. And yet, Jesus seems to be mixing up the mustard bush with the mighty cedars called upon by Ezekiel. The image is the ancient one of the tree of life. We'd expect a cedar or a sequoia, but Jesus finds the power of God better imaged in a tiny, no-account seed. It's not how we expect divine activity to look. Yet the tree of life is here, in the cross around which we gather, the tree into which we are grafted through baptism, the true vine that nourishes us with its fruit in the cup we share. It may not appear all that impressive, but while nobody's looking it grows with a power beyond our understanding.

We see this theme in other parts of scripture. In Daniel 4, a chapter filled with bizarre imagery, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream of a tree in which birds could nest and under which animals could seek shelter (verses 10-12). Daniel 4 speaks to the role of kings and rulers to provide an opportunity for life. The king should set up conditions that permitted people in the realm to flourish. Mark's parable draws on the theme, using a bush that provides shade and protection (Mark 4:30-32).

The parable from Mark uses this image of stability and security as a metaphor for the dominion of God. The tree or shrub, it is worth noting, does not create stability at the sacrifice of individuality. The tree does not coerce order. The tree provides the space and the opportunity for life to develop.

How many ears long desperately for such a message? With estimates of refugees worldwide around 65 million and total displaced persons over 200 million, might Ezekiel's vision bring both comfort to the sojourner and impetus to mission? Might the declaration that "in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind" give heart to those who find even sturdy physical structures still a place of turmoil and abuse and give the courage to keep going? [adapted from Charles L. Aaron, Jr. Working Preacher]

There are lots of ways to find meaning in the passage from Ezekiel. The twig or sprig is often taken as a messianic figure—like the Isaiah 11 passage that speaks of the root of Jesse. This Davidic figure will bring protection and prosperity to the "birds" who live on his branches. And all the other trees around this noble tree will know that God is Lord because of the figure. The parable then imagines a way forward for ancient Israel, a way that preserves some continuity with the old way of life—it is a twig from the top of

a current tree. But a way that imagines something new as well. A new location. A new tree. New branches.

God acts decisively in history, calling us to act alongside God's intentions. God takes, sets, breaks off, plants, brings low, makes high, dries up, and makes flourish. God's ways are subtle but powerful. God intends a better future, one in which there is an equal place for all. It begins in a small way, not easily perceptible. But those beginnings yield stunning results.

Anyone who has stood in a sequoia or redwood grove can understand why the ancients regarded such places as sacred and gathered there to worship. We recognize, in the poem's invitation for all birds to nest here and for all trees to come to know God, Israel's call to be a blessing to all peoples. The poet-prophet Ezekiel provides a holy ode to hope, just as does Jesus in his odd translation of the image into a parable.

The in-breaking of God's kingdom, though small now, will blossom, grow, and persist in a powerful way. And that power will be expressed in reversals.

Did you catch that in Ezekiel's poem?

All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.  
I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree;  
I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.  
I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

We have heard echoes of this even in the song of Mary:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty..." (Luke 1:46-53)

We can hear the yearning and the hope. We can taste the tears as well as the ambrosia. What you see now will not abide. What looks every bit like the last word will not be permitted to hold sway. The evil of the present day will be turned towards God's ways and the Lord's will. Fortunes will be reversed. The high will be brought low, and the low high. And mercy will abound.

This is the good news. This is the message of Ezekiel and Mark and Jesus and Mary. God is at work, freeing God's people from the hands of oppressors and working in

history from the bottom up. Or maybe almost insidiously. Mustard, after all, was a lot less like a flowering shrub that we might plant around the edges of our property as an accent than it was an invasive weed, something you want to keep out of your garden and lawn at all costs because it runs amok easily, gets out of hand, and nearly takes over whatever ground it infests.

In these images, God reminds us that the Kingdom of God comes of its own, and comes for us. The Kingdom Ezekiel envisions and Jesus proclaims has room for everyone. It overturns the things the world has taught us are insurmountable and creates a new and open future. [adapted from David Lose, *In the meantime*]

In these days I see our national value system crumbling. Truth seems to have been so relativized as to become unimportant. The abuse of the poor and the immigrant has become commonplace. And, most recently, our Attorney General misused scripture to rationalize separating immigrant families! I don't know about you, but I need to hear today's word of hope. And hearing it, I want to sing that old African-American spiritual: "Like a tree planted by the water, we will not be moved." Or perhaps it is useful to imagine ourselves as invasive mustard plants in an open field, metaphors for the good news of God spreading into us and throughout the world.

That is not the vision Marie and I have for that field in Michigan, of course. The thought of invasive species taking over gives me the heebie-jeebies. But then, it is a metaphor, not a warning.

As we go about the years-long process of developing a field of clay into one of rich and productive soil, devoid of the poisons that have artificially goaded it into minimal productivity in recent years, we hold onto hope. It is a hope buoyed by God's promises, but that is not yet quite visible. We know that we are loved in a place rife with her relatives. We know that God provides; the many seasonal fruits of the area bear juicy witness to that. We know that restoration begins often in small, nearly imperceptible ways. And we hope, as we do for our nation and for our world, that God is preparing a way—growing a tree, scattering grain, nurturing a mustard seed—so that there will yet be abiding and productive places where all of God's creatures may thrive—here, there, and everywhere.

May such hope become a tree that reaches the heavens or an invasive species that spreads wildly among us. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.