

June 13, 2021 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Ezekiel 17:22-24, 2 Cor. 5:6-10, 14-17
Mark 4:26-34

[<https://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/yearwithfrogandtoada/seeds.htm>. Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus for this date, The Sleeping Gardener; <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3036>. And the link to Every Meal: <https://www.everymeal.org/>]

Let us pray...May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our gardener, our grace. Amen.

Peace to you, Beloved.

Our family loves the musical “A Year with Frog and Toad”.

It's based on a series of children's stories by Arnold Lobel, published in the 1970s.

The books were made into the musical that premiered at Children's Theater Company here in Minneapolis.

In the musical, Frog is tall, green and easy-going.

Toad is short, brown and more of a worrier.

The story (the “year”) begins in the late winter.

Frog and Toad, who are still hibernating, visit each other's dreams.

Once they wake up, Toad eagerly plants seeds.

Seeds he watches obsessively,

expecting immediate results.

shouting at them, and then fearing they are too frightened to grow, he is full of regret

Toad invites the support, the loving affirmation, of the birds,

only to have the birds eye the poor seeds as tasty food.

Toad writes poetry for them, plays the tuba for them, he even tries interpretive dance.

Every which way, to springtime exhaustion,

toad coaxes and cajoles his seeds, encourages and serenades them:

Don't be afraid, go on and grow

Are you afraid, or are you slow

I am your gardener, you are my seeds

I will attend to all of your needs

And finally....Toad falls asleep.

In the morning, it's Frog who wakes him.

“Oh, Frog!” Toad says, “I was up half the night!”

I think I must have frightened my seeds VERY badly.”

“Well, you couldn’t have frightened them too badly,” Frog explains, “They’re growing!”
“Look! ... Look more closely! ... They will grow bigger....Soon, Toad, soon.”

I’ve been watching this hot, hot week as a good many of us tended to seeds and seedlings,
watering in the early morning and late evening,
willing our tender shoots to survive and prosper.

All the time, I’ve been mulling over today’s gospel, these two parables.

On the one hand they (particularly the story of the mustard seed)
are classic Sunday School fare.

And on the other hand, to our dirt-stained knees and sunburned necks,
they have a magical, unreal air.

For while growth is always a miracle, we know how hard gardeners work:
preparing the soil, planting, watering, pruning, picking.

I haven’t seen Kathy Knudson, or Madhu, or Marty, or Julie and Bob, or Sonja, or Sharla, and
the other Hope gardeners just throwing around the seeds and taking a nap.

I wonder how these parables sounded to those listeners so long ago?

Debie Thomas writes of own experience gardening,

Admitting that she knows herself, how if she could,
she’d force those plants to grow and produce out of sheer willpower and hardwork.

Then she names her ideal of control, of sure results, of linear progression,
of defined labor and tangible rewards.

“Of course,” she writes, “The inevitable corollary to this ideal is anxiety:
am I doing enough? Have I covered all bases? What will happen if I fail?”

“Thankfully,” Debie Thomas concludes, “my ideal is not God’s” [ideal].

Jesus uses these parables to describe the kingdom of God,

to show us God’s ideal, God’s kingdom, what it looks like,
and in so doing to burst us from our well-tended imaginations, and our cultural norms.

What’s the kingdom of God like? Four images:

First... The kingdom of God is like a gardener who sleeps.

This flies in the face of all our perfectionistic tendencies, our workaholic ways,
our sweating and hovering, our protecting and weeding and worrying. I admit it, I get it!

The gardener in today’s parable sleeps...

They trust the process.

They trust the mystery.

Goodness, they trust the seed and soil.

They are involved, yes, but they trust something larger than themselves, let's call it grace.

A little later in our service we'll recognize graduates, some from the congregation, for PEASE Academy, from Lutheran Campus Ministry.

All that labor, all that love, all that energy,

in the midst of pandemic, uprising, financial upheaval,

and there is space for grace, for honoring good work done and big dreams coming,

and resting, breathing, rooting is grace.

So the kingdom of God is like the gardener who sleeps.

Related to this is a second point, the kingdom of God is like good soil,

or we might just say, mysterious soil.

We want the secret sauce,

and God-knows my spouse has told me enough times, just this week,

about the special combination of compost and turning over the soil

that may just help our newly transplanted raspberries succeed.

But, when we're honest, this soil is full of mystery.

The growing: it happens out of our eye sight.

It's hard to trust the soil, to say our prayers and let God do God's thing.

It would be easier to just pretend that we are God, don't you think?

But we're not God, and in this mysterious soil is life, and life abundant.

Third, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

A few of us spent Wednesday morning at an open house at the Every Meal warehouse, off Patton Road in Roseville.

The story of the mustard seed was on our minds.

Every Meal is the new name for what we around Hope have known as The Sheridan Story.

It began in 2010 with 27 kindergarteners at Sheridan School in northeast Minneapolis.

We joined the effort around 2016 along with other churches in our neighborhood,

taking turns quietly putting bags of food in backpacks at Marcy Open School on Fridays

so families that requested it would have enough for the weekend.

While they started at Sheridan School with 27 kids, they grew to 5 schools, then 50, then 400.

It's multiplied like crazy.

Now Every Meal still provides food in backpacks, but also to a variety of other sites.

Perhaps you've seen the bags of food at the Y or at your local library.

Doesn't this feel like a branchy, bushy mustard seed story?

We'll need more volunteers as this fall we'll likely be able to return to Marcy School.

Next Sunday, June 20th, we'll take a noisy offering for Every Meal.

Bring your coins to worship. or drop them off at church.

While we all love these mustard seed stories,

the punch of this parable is not only that these seeds start tiny,
but that they are a weed!

People in Jesus' time wouldn't have dreamed of sowing mustard seeds.

Who wants to sow invasive weeds?

Did you know that the Minnesota Department of Agriculture on its website has entire pages
delineating their "noxious weed list"?

It includes the troublesome buckthorn that my dad is always after, and plenty more.

In Palestine of Jesus' time, the stubborn, weedy mustard plant would have made the list!

It would easily get out of control, seeding and reseeding with abandon.

Jesus is saying something here about what we center, what we see as beautiful, or holy, or
valuable.

And it isn't what anyone expects.

It isn't who anyone expects.

Finally, the kingdom of God is a flock of birds.

How many times have I read this passage and seen the birds only as ornamental?

But there's more happening here.

Who invites birds to their garden or orchard?!

That's why people put up scarecrows!

But in this story that Jesus tells, the kingdom of God is all about radical inclusion,
hospitality and welcome

for, yes, even the birds, those we'd rather shun.

Debie Thomas concludes, "Here is what the kingdom of God looks like:

Slow, mysterious growth.

Periods of fallowness.

Plants we can neither control nor contain.

Weeds that run wild and still nourish.

Hungry, raucous birds.

Feasts we might mistake for waste.

Gardeners who take naps."

Dear friends in Christ, there's an element (a big element) of surrender and trust

in these images of God's kingdom.

It's so hard to let go, to trust the process.

Some days I can, other days trust feels impossible.

And that's exactly where the Holy Spirit is at work

scattering seeds hither and yon

nudging us where she needs us,

widening our imagination,

deepening our view,

planting grace in us and far beyond us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.