

## PROPER SIX, PENTECOST 3, YEAR B, JUNE 13, 2021

This is the time of the year when we get outside and start working in our gardens. Springtime is a wondrous and beautiful time of the year when everything starts to bloom again and the riot of colors make our gardens come alive. One of the negatives of this time of the year is not just the pollen but all the weeds that also begin to sprout. It took me almost two weeks to clean out all the weeds from the rectory beds as a lot of them had deep roots. We all know that weeds are insidious, and you have to constantly be on the attack to keep them under control. Since Jesus came from an agricultural area its not surprising that many of his parables were about weeds and seeds and their relationship to the Kingdom of God.

Today's gospel actually contains two parables about seeds and also a weed. Not many of us grow things from seeds anymore as we rely on plant farms to begin the process so we can plant a small established flower or bush to speed the process along. Thanks to Heidi I have discovered the Metropolitan Farm and was able to get a greater variety of deer resistant annuals that makes the yard look quite lovely as soon as you plant them. But it is amazing to walk around that plant farm and realize all these plants began as a seed.

If we look at the first parable in the gospel, we're told the farmer goes out and scatters the seed and then doesn't do anything until it's harvest time. I'm not sure I know of any farmer who doesn't tend to their fields on a daily basis. I, just like you, pretty much check on our flower and vegetable beds on a daily basis to see how they're doing. So how is a farmer who appears to neglect his crop like the Kingdom of God?

Then we have one of the most famous parables about the mustard seed. Did you know the mustard seed is considered a weed? The common mustard plant is invasive and can overtake vegetable and cereal crops. It will compete with the crops for light, water and nutrients to the crops detriment and can reduce potential yield and seed quality of the harvested crop. It is also a bush not a tree. The parable tells us that bird's nest in its branches. Well, don't birds eat the seeds of the plants and isn't that why scarecrows are put into fields to scare the birds away? How is the kingdom of God like a weed or birds that eat the seeds?

So, to summarize, it's kind of interesting when you look at these things closely why would Jesus claim the kingdom of God is, first of all, like a farmer who doesn't seem to care about his crops after he plants his seeds, secondly, an invasive weed and thirdly, birds who will eat the seeds? Is this some kind of cosmic joke?

Let's look at it this way. As I said, the farmer just scatters the seed and then does nothing till the harvest. Most farmers plan, then prepare the field making neat little rows in well-manicured beds. They keep a wary eye on the weather. They protect their gardens from birds, rabbits, and deer. From early spring until harvest time, they water, they fertilize, they prune, they weed, and they worry.

But not the gardener in Jesus's parable. He takes it easy. He doesn't micro-manage. He doesn't second-guess. Instead, he enjoys the rest that comes from trusting a process that is ancient, mysterious, cyclical, and sure. He trusts the seeds. He trusts the soil. He trusts the sun, the shade, the clouds, the rain. Yes, he participates in the process by planting and harvesting. He pays attention to the seasons and gets to work when the time is ripe. But he never harbors the illusion that he's in charge. In this story of

the kingdom, it is not our striving, our piousness, our particular doctrinal purity, or our impressive prayers that cause us to grow and thrive in God's garden. It is grace alone.

Now there is something to be said about the soil too. When we plant something in the soil, we hope it takes root and flourishes. But what goes on in the ground and in the soil is hidden from our view. We look outside and see nothing but either the earth or fragile shoots. Yet we harbor everything from uncertainty to hope that the soil will produce the crops we yearn for. Isn't that true about our prayers and even our faith? We pray fervently for all kinds of things and get anxious when we don't seem to get the answers we want. Prayers and even our faith are like planting seeds in the soil that need to germinate in God's care because we never know what delicate potential those prayers or faith might produce.

Now about that mustard seed. If a first century farmer in Palestine were foolish enough to plant it, it would quickly take over his land, dropping seeds everywhere, and breaking down all barriers of separation between itself and the other plants in the garden. Imagine a farmer today planting kudzu, or dandelions. These are commonplace nuisances we try to get rid of, not plants we'd ever cultivate on purpose.

The last image in this set of parables is that of nesting birds finding shade in the branches of the mustard plant. It's a pretty image on its face, but it, too, as it turns out, is a joke: who wants birds taking up residence in their gardens so they can eat the seeds?

So what is Jesus saying when he describes the sacred and the holy as a tiny, insignificant mustard seed? What does it mean to take an invasive, spindly weed — a plant we'd sooner discard than sow — and make it the very heart, the very structural center, of God's kingdom? Who and what counts in God's kingdom? What is beautiful? Who matters? Where do we see the sacred?

Just think for a moment and remember that Jesus was a baby born into poverty on the edges of the Roman empire. He was an insignificant poor outcast by the standards of the empire. Now fast forward and remember that the disciples who first followed him were a bunch of raggedy fishermen and a corrupt tax collector. They were clueless, clumsy, timid, and doubtful. Then the majority of people who followed Jesus were prostitutes, women, the diseased, the outcasts of society and yet these were the people that God's kingdom rested on. These insignificant people who were considered the weeds of society were the ones to push forth the message of Jesus and what the Kingdom of God is really like. It's a message we all too often have forgotten. Just think of how many times we have "metaphorically" shooed the birds away — those individuals we see as a nuisance — because we're so enmeshed in our own needs and wants that we have ignored the needs and wants of others especially the marginalized.

You see, in this parable, Jesus is telling us the kingdom of God is all about welcoming the unwelcome. It's about sheltering the unwanted and practicing radical inclusion. The garden of God exists to offer nourishment to everyone the world deems unworthy. It exists to attract and to house the very people we'd rather shun. Bottom line the primary purpose of God's kingdom is hospitality which means inclusion of all God's creation.

So the lessons from these parables is that we are always in God's grace, mercy and expansive life changing care. That care requires us to look outside our own prejudices, our own blinders to seek God in the common place and embrace the

unwanted as beloved. There is shelter in God's kingdom for the unwanted weeds and birds because the mystery of God's love runs deep in the soil of God's kingdom.

So, the challenge remains to embrace the weeds and birds and allow them to flourish within our midst so others understand they are welcome. Yes, the kingdom of God is bizarre and at times laughable but this is what the kingdom of God is like. We also need to not only embrace weeds but be like weeds that cause good trouble in spreading God's love with wild abandon. Because it is when we scatter those seeds of God's inclusive love that we are truly being the Kingdom of God. Amen