

A Sermon for the
2nd Sunday after Pentecost
June 14, 2009
Texts: Ezekiel 17:22-24
Mark 4:26-34

“Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.” Ezekiel 17: 22-23

“[Jesus] also said, ‘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. The earth produces itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’ He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’”
Mark 4:26-32

With what can we compare the kingdom of God? The gospels are full of Jesus’ questions. More often than not, once you have begun to formulate in your mind what answer you might give to his question, he provides his answer. An answer that surprises us, unsettles us, that challenges the answer that those around him would have given.

Purposely the lectionary writers selected an Old Testament lesson to highlight the challenge that Jesus’ answering parable gives to that question. Ezekiel tells of the promise by God to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon, that God himself will take a sprig from the loftiest, tenderest, part of the cedar. He will plant it on the heights of Israel, nurture it, so that it will grow, produce boughs, and become a noble cedar. Every kind of bird - hear all of the nations - will live under the shade of its branches. To what can we compare the kingdom of God? The noble, lofty cedar.

But what does Jesus answer? Not the cedar, not the oak, or the redwood, or the sequoia, any of which would have been a suitable image of majesty, authority, and power. No, Jesus says we should compare the kingdom of God to that other majestic symbol, the mustard weed. That is what the mustard was considered, a noxious weed. A plant that, when it gets into a field, inexorably grows and spreads and takes over that whole field. It’s a lowly, humble, persistently hardy, difficult to eradicate plant. A perfect symbol for the humble, self-sacrificing, persistently

loving kingdom of God that Jesus was going about preaching of and showing in his ministry. If there were a weed more familiar to us that could help us to more easily grasp the impact of Jesus' parable it might be the majestic and lofty dandelion. For most of us have encountered the ubiquitous and persistent dandelion in our yards either to our pleasure or pain.

With that in mind, I offer another parable, a story, I found that features the dandelion and serves as a response to Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, about the kingdom of God. Once upon a time, there was a woman who had a beautiful home and a beautiful lawn. Old Mrs. McLeod loved her fully restored Victorian home with its gingerbread trim, beautifully painted; its interior with hardwood floors beautifully maintained, and elegantly decorated. But her pride and joy was her lawn.

She had a small table with chairs set out under a tree in the yard where she could sit and enjoy the lawn, a great expanse of green, with shrubs and trees, all perfectly trimmed. She had a man who mowed the lawn and a couple of times a year trimmed the trees, but other than that she wouldn't trust anyone else with her lawn. When the first bit of green appeared in the spring, out she would come, still in her winter coat and earmuffs, to spread fertilizer, herbicide, Bug-be-Gone, and all sorts of other things on her lawn. She had one of those automatic sprinkler systems that kept every corner of her lawn lush and green even on the driest days of summer. And should any unsuspecting weed have the misfortune of popping up in that lawn she would rip it out by the roots within minutes of its appearance.

Now, across the street from Mrs. McLeod lived a detestable young family. Actually, most people thought the Patrick's were delightful: the kids were smart and funny, the parents worked hard and volunteered actively in the community. But Mrs. McLeod, not so much. In the summer, when the kids were out of school, they played and ran all around the neighborhood. And it never failed that eventually something, a ball, a frisbee, the dog, would end up in Mrs. McLeod's yard, with one of kid's usually chasing it and tramping down her beautiful grass. And no matter how many times she would yell at them things never changed.

And the Patrick's yard! They were some kind of hippies or something. They let whatever came up in their yard grow there. Although they did weed the vegetable garden that they happened to plant right by the street, and which produced an abundance of tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, and other fresh vegetables.

In the summer the Patrick's front lawn was alive with bees, butterflies, and other critters flying about the patches of clover, stargrass, forget-me-nots - and dandelions. That was what upset Mrs. McLeod the most, really - everyone knows that dandelions don't pay attention to where there seeds grow. She thought it terribly inconsiderate that the Patrick's never sprayed the dandelions in their yard. And when they went to seed, they blew over into her yard and made that much more work for her.

There ought to be rules about such things she thought. And in her darker moments considered marching right over and knocking on the Patrick's door and giving them a piece of her mind. But usually she would chicken out when she got to the curb. She knew it wouldn't do any good. Mr. Patrick told her once as he was helping her cut up a big branch that had blown out of one of her trees that they didn't believe in using chemicals on the lawn, that it would be bad for the children. Anyway, he would say, have you ever really looked at dandelion flowers, they're really beautiful.

Well, it just so happened one year that Mrs. McLeod's granddaughter who lived across the state developed difficulty with her pregnancy and was put on bed rest for the last month before her due date. She needed Mrs. McLeod to come stay with her to help with housekeeping and to watch the two older children. It was just before Memorial Day when she left. Reluctantly, she arranged for the Patrick children to come over once a day and turn on the sprinklers to water the yard. The morning she was loading the car to leave, Mrs. Patrick and the children came over with a cooler full of vegetables from their garden and gave them to her to take to help with her granddaughter. The littlest Patrick had prepared a bouquet of dandelions and other wildflowers for her to take, all wrapped in a moist paper towel.

As it turned out she had to stay a couple of extra weeks longer than planned and it was after the Fourth of July before she got home. It was late at night when she arrived and went straight to bed. When she came out the next morning to enjoy her coffee under the tree she was horrified to see five or six bright yellow spots in the yard. Dandelions! She hadn't been there to pull them up right away, and now they were blooming. When she got closer it was even more horrifying, several of them had already gone to seed. When she took the Patrick's cooler back later that morning it was all she could do to be cordial.

That evening Mr. Patrick came over to tell her about the terrific storm they had had while she was gone. The housekeeper had been there the next day and discovered her basement was full of water. When she saw Mr. Patrick outside, she asked him for help, not knowing what else to do. Turned out the sump pump was shorted out, so he got that working right. He didn't tell her that he and the kids had come back the next day with a shop-vac and buckets and sponges and cleaned up her basement.

Right before supper she found ten more dandelions and was about to go over tell Mr. Patrick how his yard was ruining hers, but something stopped her. The rest of the summer was an all out struggle to get rid of the dandelions but it was a losing battle. She'd treat one spot and there would be more somewhere else. Just after Labor Day she went to visit her brother in St. Louis for a few days. When she got back her yard was absolutely covered with dandelions. She threw her luggage down and reached to pull up the ones nearest her. But then she looked at it, and realized she'd forgotten how cheerful a dandelion's yellow flower looks. Then suddenly she was surprised by an old, old memory of she and a neighborhood friend as kids, collecting dandelion flowers, of making wishes and blowing the dandelion seeds. She took her bags inside. Made some tea. Then came outside with a vase, went to the yard, picked a dandelion head full of seeds, made a wish, and blew it away. Then picked a bunch of yellow flowers and put them in the vase for her table.

To what should we compare the kingdom of God? How about the dandelion? With persistence it insinuates itself into a yard in little ways until before you know it people of all kinds are embraced by the love of God. Amen