

Our assigned texts this morning are so appropriate to the season in which we find ourselves, the season of spring moving towards summer, the season of gardens and gardening. Our lesson from Ezekiel focuses on God planting a sprig from a cedar that will grow, produce boughs and bear fruit. Our gospel lesson features two seed-related parables that lift up the mysterious nature of planting, germination, and surprisingly vigorous growth. Maybe these lessons are even somewhat appropriate to Father's Day, as certainly men are often involved in lawn, garden, and tree care. I remember my Dad working out in the yard, and I love watching my husband mow the lawn! Which happens frequently right now, because it's that time of year; everything is growing! Nearly every group conversation I've been a part of recently has included comparing notes on how our gardens are coming along. Of course, said "gardens" range from a bucket containing a single tomato plant on one's patio to modest salad-type gardens like Phil to and I have, to fairly significant gardens like many others have, but we can all identify how our efforts to interact with growing things are going. At a clergy meeting last week, we were comparing apple trees. Our apple trees are not doing a whole lot this year; last year, they had a staggering number of blossoms and fruit, so this is their off-year. One of my colleagues said, "Plants are intelligent, aren't they? Those trees know they had a banner year last year and that this year they need a period of rest." I was struck by his words, as I hadn't exactly considered the *intelligence*-factor of trees or plants before in quite that way. And yet I see the verse in our first lesson that states, "All the trees of the field shall *know* that I am the Lord." So, maybe nature, maybe trees and plants are more intelligent, more *knowledgeable* than I realize? They have knowledge of the Lord; they recognize their Creator? And based on the number of times Scripture holds up for us images, metaphors, and parables that are nature based, not only do trees and plants *have knowledge* of God---we can gain knowledge *about* God from trees and plants. Why else does Jesus tell these parables about seeds and gardens? Why else is the Creation story set within a Garden? Why else do references to the beauty and healing quality of nature abound throughout both the Old and New Testament? The Creation can certainly reveal the Creator to us.

This sounds like very good news for us, who live in an area of great natural beauty. And yet, a challenge remains even for us, as it does for others-- namely that we can all too easily become surprisingly distanced from our natural environment. There are some thinkers among us who suggest that in our current times, we have *lost* some of our sense of nurturing connection to the natural world, both individually and culturally. They suggest that we tend to suffer from a *nature deficit*. One such prophetic voice is journalist Richard Louv, who has coined the term “Nature deficit disorder” in his book, “The Last Child in the Woods”. Louv, and others like him, point to statistics that suggest that children in our day and age spend less and less time, especially *unstructured* time, outdoors. Somewhat surprisingly, this statistic holds true across the board in terms of locale; whether children live in Knife River in a country setting or in NYC in a high-rise, statistically, they are likely to spend significantly less time outdoors than preceding generations. You may point to online gaming and smart phones, or to structured sports and other school activities, or even to a greater fear among parents of giving their child free reign to roam about a bit, but whatever the reasons, children and perhaps many adults, too, spend less time outdoors. Our 100 year old matriarch, Audrey Carlson, has often told me how lucky she feels to have been young when she *was* young, running and playing freely about this community outdoors, without a lot of restrictions or other distractions. I can see her point; the world has changed in that way. And I understand the reason for those changes, even as I can feel some sadness about it. Both children and adults tend to be less connected to their natural environment, which is different not only from preceding generations of our own, but also different from the vast bulk of human history, including those people who feature in the Bible. What is the result of this lack of connection with nature? To quote Rich Louv, we have--“ increased feelings of stress, trouble paying attention, feelings of not being rooted in the world.” Hmmm. Stress, difficulty paying attention, not feeling rooted in the world....those anxious and distracted feelings are *very* different from the kind of hopeful and peaceful feelings we hear described in our texts today, highlighting God’s good creation. Ironically, while children and adults today may have a much more profound sense of environmentalism, we may actually all spend far less time in that world to the extent that we experience the deficit. This nature deficit, according

to this way of thinking, is harming us in body and in soul; physically, we grow heavy and stiff, and spiritually, we lose touch with God through communion with nature.

There are movements and reactions that have grown up in response to this concern. Some of them seem initially a little new-agey or even humorous to me, and yet their very existence as a “thing” points to our dilemma of distance from nature. Have you heard of Forest-Bathing? Here’s a definition: “Whether you call it a fitness trend or a mindfulness practice (or a bit of both), what exactly is forest bathing? The term emerged in Japan in the 1980s as a physiological and psychological exercise. The purpose was twofold: to offer an eco-antidote to tech-boom burnout and to inspire residents to reconnect with and protect the country’s forests. The recognition is that [time spent immersed in nature is good for us](#). Many cultures have long recognized the importance of the natural world to human health. Forest bathing is not just for the wilderness-lover; the practice can be as simple as walking in any natural environment and consciously connecting with what’s around you. For a more structured experience, you can join trained guides for a meditative two- to three-hour ecotherapy excursion.” So...you may be interested to know that you too can become a certified leader of Forest Bathing groups. Now, I view this with a bit of tongue-in-cheek irony, as it seems to me to simply describe the benefits that many of us have known forever of camping, picnicking, hiking, and foraging in the woods, but those things don’t actually happen as frequently or as easily as they once did. Which points towards that nature deficit and the reason that Forest Bathing exists; it’s an intentional effort to reconnect.

Another such effort, which I just learned about at Lectio last Tuesday, is called *Grounding*. Are you familiar with that? Again, a definition, this one from a medical online site: “Grounding, also known as earthing, is when you stand on the earth or have contact with a product that’s grounded into the earth. This connects your body to the natural electric charge of the earth, transferring electrons into your body. Some research shows that soaking up electrons can lower inflammation, ease stress, and improve sleep, to name a few.” Grounding is most easily achieved by walking or standing barefoot outside, even for 10 minutes a day, or by lying on a beach or wading in a lake or river. Again, this seems like something that happened effortlessly when I was a kid running through the sprinkler in my backyard; but to be fair to this new trend, when *did* most of us last run

barefoot through a sprinkler in our backyards? In fact, the number of my barefoot encounters of any length in nature are few enough that I can remember the last time---on my Sabbatical, when we were on a beach in St. Augustine, I took off my sandals to walk on the sand and wade in the Atlantic Ocean. I have no idea if anything involving natural electric charges occurred, but it was refreshing and fun.

All of this is simply to suggest that particularly at this time of year, we may want to more fully immerse ourselves in connection with nature, with sandy beaches, cold Lake Superior water, green grass, plants in our garden, apple trees on our lawns, and the forest and meadows that surround us. In doing so, we are actually reconnecting spiritually with both the Creation *and* the Creator. And we are taking on the mindset of the huge majority of humanity that preceded us in terms of how we interact with the natural world, including the humanity that populates the Holy Scriptures.

Let's look into our nature-based lessons this morning for a brief moment. The lesson from Ezekiel features cedar trees, much prized in the ancient world and Middle East. The cedar was considered a *noble* tree, according to our lesson. And this tree, like many kinds of trees, provides so much: beauty, shade, flowers, fruit, an environment for birds and other creatures to live in, wood for fires or building. As we see everywhere in nature, it's not a zero-sum game; we don't get back exactly what we put in. We don't plant one seed and get one apple in return, for example; we get a tree that for years provides shade, blossoms, beauty, fruit, and blessing. Nature has been created in such a way as to be *abundant*, and in our Ezekiel passage, this planting of a sprig that grows into a noble cedar is a metaphor for how God will restore the exiled Hebrew people in Babylonia and make them again into a faithful and significant people. Those people in exile were desperate for hope, and this prophecy provided just that. Because few things are as hopeful as recognizing that when God is in the mix, even a small beginning, even a tender sprig can produce unexpectedly vigorous results.

That theme does carry over into our Gospel lesson, doesn't it? In fact, Jesus likely had this Ezekiel passage in mind as he told his mustard seed parable, as we see the similarities with small beginnings to big results, and branches that even birds may nest in, an extending of that growth to shelter others. There's a

difference between the cedar tree and the mustard bush however. Cedars, as I mentioned, were loved and respected within their ancient world. Mustard was regarded with a bit more mixed sentiment. It *did* provide a flavorful spice, and it was also used medicinally; but it was nevertheless considered something of a nuisance plant, the kind of plant that takes over your garden, an invasive that knocks out plants you'd prefer, maybe like zucchini or dandelions. That Jesus chooses a mustard bush rather than a lofty cedar to represent the Kingdom of God on earth is probably an example of his keen sense of storytelling magic. Would *we* think to say, "The Kingdom of God is like a zucchini? Or the kingdom of God is like a field of dandelions?" As opposed to saying, "The kingdom of God is like a giant redwood or a mighty oak?" The comparison is unexpected. There's an element of surprise, a humor, a bite, to this parable that drives home the point: stopping the growth of God's kingdom is like trying to control the spread of dandelions or zucchini; it's not going to happen. God's kingdom is pervasive, determined, resilient, adaptable, and surprisingly resistant to efforts to do away with it. And that should encourage us, shouldn't it? Our world, our culture may not always be very God or Faith-friendly, but God's kingdom is pretty much unstoppable and irresistible. And even the most humble of starts can be maximized by God's Holy Spirit into a lofty cedar or vigorous mustard bush that also provide shelter for other creatures. Isn't that what the Church, and what our church, are all about? This is encouraging news for us that what we do matters and grows and blesses others!

So, I'm thinking my friend may be right: *plants are intelligent*. They have knowledge of the Lord *and* knowledge of the Lord to share with us, if we pay attention. The Creator we know through the Creation does not give up, provides an abundance of return from even the smallest effort, can create big results out of small beginnings, and causes growth to happen mysteriously, whether or not we are on top of our game, as the parable of the seeds that spout while we're sleeping demonstrates, also in our Gospel lesson. All of these nature-oriented images are exceedingly hopeful, and they are another reminder of why spending some time within the Creation can be healing and restorative to us. Whether you're forest bathing or grounding or gardening or mowing the lawn or hiking or exploring, it's so worth our while to pay attention. And this is the perfect season

to do so. To embrace Creation. To embrace the Creator. To care for the Creator, the Creation, and those creatures of all types who inhabit that Creation with us. Amen.