

Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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Eighth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 12A – July 26, 2020

1 Kings 3:5-12. Psalm 119:129-136, Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Have you gotten to the beach or a lake yet this summer to try to cool off in the heat – or maybe just to be in the fresh air after being in isolation for weeks? If you have, I bet what you probably didn't think about was the invasive species you might have met in the water.

You know, invasive species are the plants and animals – fish and other sea creatures – that come on ships from other parts of the world. They don't have any natural enemies in our area of the world. So, when they get here, they just multiply and multiply and multiply, and pretty soon they've taken up all the ground, or eaten up all the native food fish so the species that thrive where we are can't survive.

What does that have to do with our Gospel text for today? Well, you might be surprised to learn that mustard plants are an invasive species. In fact, growing mustard seeds on purpose is kind of like planting dandelions in your flowerbed! Nobody grew mustard plants purposely in Jesus' time. In fact, the ancient rabbis considered the mustard plant to be unclean: blemished and unholy because of the way it took over a field.

“Beware of invasive species” might be the warning that ought to be read with today's parables. Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the biggest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and the birds come and make nests in its branches.” Most people who hear it are fond of this parable, because we think: big things come from small beginnings; nice, it presents an attractive view of nature. But parables are also supposed to make us stop and think; to make us a little confused to think about how God works so that we can consider God at work “outside the box” and beyond our expectations for how God should work.

So, Jesus could have been saying, God's Kingdom is like a tiny little throwaway seed that somebody foolishly plants, that then it sprouts and grows and takes over, providing a safe place of refuge in which birds and other creatures find a home.

But in reality, the mustard bush is not really a big beautiful tree, not like a majestic oak tree or a towering cedar. It's an unruly, six foot shrub, that grows like crazy, and can't be stopped.

So, what does the mustard seed have to do with you and me? Well, there's a tiny seed of God's word, planted into you and me. There's a tiny seed of faith in each of us. Sometimes, it doesn't seem to be enough. Sometimes it seems weak. It may be just a word that's spoken, "You are forgiven." It may be an old hymn that we sing, a little bit of water splashed on a baby's head, a little wafer that we eat, or a sip of wine that we drink. We may think that the seed seems too small to do the job; that it's foolish for us to think that little bit of faith in us can save us.

But— it grows, doesn't it? Our faith in Jesus Christ grows. When we trust in God, the faith that is God's gift grows until it takes over our whole life, until it crowds out everything the world is trying to grow in us. That little seed of God's kingdom takes over, grabs hold of us, and makes a place in us for God to abide so that we serve others, and don't live just for ourselves.

And this harkens back to what we considered last week – that the accomplishment of God's will through us takes time and sometimes requires us to wait; to be patient. Remembering Congressman John Lewis' ministry again, he often urged people to go slowly in working for change. "It's better to be a pilot light than to be a firecracker; you last longer," is a caution he said he often repeated, especially to younger activists in the fight for civil rights.

But, back to our Gospel, Jesus then says, "the Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman mixed in with three measures of flour and it leavened the whole batch." Now, since the measures are foreign to us, we can't tell, but the amount of bread this lady is trying to make is enormous —enough to feed fifty people three meals a day for a week! And what does she have to make all that bread? A tiny little bit of yeast, dried up, looking lifeless, smelling strange, but amazingly, secretly full of life and thriving—what a contradiction! And this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, Jesus tells us. A tiny word, a strange, almost unbelievable promise, the gross and senseless death of Christ on the Cross, at first blush. But his death was mixed into you and me, overflowing, full of life, with God grabbing hold of us, kneading us like the dough for a loaf of bread and making us rise into his own new creation.

Maybe that's what we need to hear the most. Maybe that's what Jesus' parables today are all about. That God is grabbing onto us, that although God's Kingdom

looks like nothing much to begin with, like an everyday mustard seed or a dusting of yeast, it still takes over, it makes us his own, and it makes us useful for him in this world and on into eternity!

The second lesson we heard today carries this theme of smallness forward by talking about human weakness. Chapter 8 of Romans assures you and me today that God meets us in that weakness. Paul tells us that when we don't know how to pray or what to pray for, God's Holy Spirit intercedes with us. God meets us wherever our life seems foolish, or when it seems like a waste. God comes to us where we are weak and don't have the answers. When we and our faith feel like a little mustard seed or a tiny measure of yeast, that's when God is secretly most active in us.

“And what shall we say about all these things?” St. Paul asks us. What shall we say about all the things that make up our mustard seed-like, yeasty lives? “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul asks. “Shall hardship, or persecution, or famine or nakedness or sword?” Shall coronavirus, or unemployment, or the threat of being evicted, or loneliness, or hard times, or rejection, or even the worst thing we can imagine happening – will that separate us from the love of Christ?

“No,” Paul says. NO. “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Right now, today, even and especially in the midst of the pandemic; in our weakness, we are more than conquerors, because we have a God who has given us himself in Jesus Christ, and with Jesus, God will give us everything else we need.

“I am convinced”, Paul says, “that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing can separate us. What security! God will not let us go. God has grabbed hold of us and won't give up on us. God, who loves us so much, won't let us be separated from him. Not even when we're at our worst. Not because of anything the world throws at us. Nothing we can even imagine can separate us from God. God is ours; we are God's. Like a Father whose grip cannot be undone, who keeps us secure, who has his strong arms tight around us, God's Kingdom comes into our lives, like a tiny seed, like a little bit of yeast, and by sheer force of grace, God

takes over, grabs on, and will never let us go. And for that we can say, “Thanks be to God!”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN