

Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 13, 2021

Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14
2 Corinthians 5:6-17
MARK 4:26-34

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Today is the third of three Sundays that I am honored to be substituting for Fr. Jack while he enjoys a well-deserved vacation. On these three Sundays, my sermons focus on “the road back,” not just from the pandemic, but “the road back” for human beings from the brokenness of life as we have known it since the first revolt of human beings against God, portrayed in succinct, mythic terms in the Garden of Eden story. Human beings as a species were born into a relationship of innocent intimacy with God, with each other, and with Creation, but broke all three relationships in our revolt against God and desires to become “like God.”

Since then, the “default settings” for the world and for human beings have been sin and brokenness, which manifest themselves in many different ways. The pandemic has brought both into bold relief: the *brokenness* of the world manifested in a virus of uncertain origin (but possibly the fruit of exploitation of exotic animals) which has killed millions of people around the globe, sickened millions more and wrecked economic havoc, and the *sin* manifested in the economic and social structures and systemic behaviors which have made poor people and People of Color of all sorts more vulnerable to the pandemic and harder to reach with a vaccine.

Two weeks ago, I spoke about how God has built the road back to God through forgiveness, healing and wholeness for human beings through holy *relationships* with God in imitation of the wondrous relationships within the Holy Trinity. I gave a couple of examples of relationships with God demonstrated by some vulnerable people which lifted up their congregations as well as themselves as they journeyed together on the road back toward healing and wholeness.

Last Sunday, I talked about how holy, wholesome and mutually-supportive relationships within communities of faith — being members of Jesus’ family — can heal loneliness and isolation, provide protection against risks like bullying, and open doors to life-affirming community membership to those who may feel like exiles in their own towns.

As I like to say, people either have an extended family or an over-extended family. For those who feel stretched too thin, *church* can be extended family.

Today I'd like to reflect on our relationship to God's Creation, one which has also been broken and marred by human sin in ways which are inextricably intertwined with injustice to people and lack of respect for God. God is the *owner* of Creation, not human beings. We are, so to speak, the "building superintendents" answerable to the owner of the building for how we treat the "building" itself — our planet — and *all* of its tenants, of whatever species.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses agricultural metaphors — far from the only time he does this. Jesus lived at a time and in a place when the majority of the people were engaged in agriculture or fishing. He likely had organic farmers in most if not all of his audiences. In those days *all* farmers were organic because there were no pesticides, and therefore no "collateral damage" to ecosystems (and people) from pesticides.

For many of us, going to a Farmer's Market instead of a grocery store may be an occasional choice we make. In the First Century Holy Land, "Farmer's Markets" were all there were. There was no mysterious or multi-faceted or long-distance process to how people got the food they ate. I can still remember the noise (and smell) of the donkeys pulling cart loads of produce into the Old City of Jerusalem at 5 o'clock in the morning when I stayed at a Youth Hostel back in 1973. (Between that and the Call To Prayer from the minaret loud speaker, there was definitely no sleeping in.) Such a scene was normal, and still is in many places.

Notably, Jesus says in today's Gospel that the Kingdom of God is an *organism*, something that *grows on its own once planted*, not something designed by architects and engineers, built with metal, stone and wood and made possible only by governments or rich corporations or very rich people.

The Kingdom of God is an organism which might have a very modest first appearance — say, in the teaching and healing ministry of an itinerant preacher on the fringe of the Roman Empire — but which will ultimately grow to provide life and shelter to many.

One year at St. Francis when we heard this parable of the mustard seed, I led an interactive sermon with kids in which I showed them two seeds: an acorn and a far tinier seed. An acorn, as they knew, can grow into an impressive oak tree. The teeny tiny seed was the seed of a *sequoia*, which can grow to be 300 feet tall, live for centuries and survive much. The Kingdom of God is like a *sequoia seed*: our job is *just to plant it*, and then let God do the rest.

In my lifetime many people have learned to think about ecology and ecosystems more and about individual plants and animals — and human beings — in isolation less, because none of us can live in isolation. (Ever try eating rocks?) Personally, I am thrilled by the robots NASA has sent up to study other planets, but honestly, the more I learn about other planets, the more I like this one.

Venus — 800 degrees F, crushing air pressure, raining sulphuric acid, sounds literally like Hell. Maybe it is. Mars, with only the wisp of an atmosphere and temperatures mostly colder than Antarctica, is not an option for us either. *There is no Planet B.* We have to take care of this one.

Taking care of what the Prayer Book, in the Eucharistic Prayer we are currently using, calls “this fragile earth, our island home,” has always received push-back, just as does is now when people raise the alarm about climate change. People got used to environmental destruction and accepted — or resigned themselves to — the unacceptable for a long time.

When I was a child, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were regularly testing nuclear weapons above ground. Radioactivity spread through the atmosphere — and found its way into cow’s milk. Want some strontium-90 with your breakfast cereal? People accepted that until they didn’t, with the Test Ban Treaty of 1963, which was controversial in its day. In fact, as we learned, America does not need to test nuclear weapons above ground to assure its national security.

As a “tween” and a teen, I went to sleep-away summer camp on a river in New Hampshire *before the Environmental Protection Agency was founded.* We were downstream from a paper mill. The river was slate gray in color and sprinkled with love seat-sized globs of unprocessed industrial sludge floating down it. Made canoeing interesting. All life in the river had long since died, courtesy of the factory which used the river as an open sewer, sacrificing the lives of animals and plants and opportunities for human beings to the pursuit of short-term profit.

People accepted that, willingly or not, until they didn’t. The Clean Water Act was passed and signed into law. Guess what? There are still factories which make paper. That kind of devastation was not necessary for human economic prosperity.

I started Oberlin College in the fall of 1970, shortly after the Cuyahoga River in nearby Cleveland, Ohio caught on fire. You know, if your river catches on fire, you have a problem. It wasn’t the first time it happened. People accepted it until they didn’t. The Clean Water Act changed things.

Today we are still reaping a bitter harvest from environmental misdeeds of years past, misdeeds that also often impact the poor and vulnerable disproportionately. I haven't heard of any Superfund sites in Bernardsville, have you? Didn't think so.

Many cities across America were systematically "red-lined" in the 1930's and 1940's with the full cooperation of the federal government. Different neighborhoods were designated as "desirable" or not based on the proportion of white people living in them. The "Undesirable", red-lined neighborhoods where Black people lived were more likely to be denied mortgages, home improvement loans and small business loans because they were designated "high risk," which became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Such neighborhoods later were also more likely to be destroyed by highways built through their midst for the convenience of suburban commuters, as was done to the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma, devastating its comeback from the utter destruction created by the white mob on May 31-June 1, 1921.

"Red-lining" also meant that certain neighborhoods had far higher percentages of their land covered with asphalt and far fewer shade trees and gardens, with the result that summertime temperatures there are still today much higher in those neighborhoods than nearby — along with higher rates of asthma, heat stroke and ambulance calls for the residents. Earlier this year, the New York Times published a study which focussed on the enduring environmental impact of red-lining as environmental injustice for the people of Richmond, Virginia and many other cities, north and south, east and west. Sin has no borders.

There are many worthwhile environmental organizations people can donate to or volunteer for, and I'm not going to single out any this morning. I just want to conclude by saying that doing right by God's Creation and doing right by *all* the people of God can and should go hand in hand. Sometimes it can be as simple and as profound as planting shade trees and vegetable gardens and fruit trees in neighborhoods which have been targeted over the years for devastation and neglect.

Such literal seeds may indeed be *seeds for the Kingdom of God*, where there will be health, holiness and justice for *all* — all people and all species.

Committed people have made a difference for change in the past, and we can make a difference now by stepping up for environmental justice and a better chance for "all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small," because "the Lord God made them all."

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