

Jun. 16 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

Last week, Reverend Nan preached a wonderful sermon that directly confronted contemporary challenges and how to address them. Today's passage gives us insight into patience and compassion, two characteristics that can be revolutionary in our difficult times. Jesus is demonstrating how the reign of heaven operates organically in contrast to the digital and media idolatry of today. This passage is not only instructive, it is truly beautiful. Jesus draws analogies from nature to give simple but profound and life-changing insights, saying, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. (Emphatic, "HE knows not, but it does indeed grow). All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head."

This spring, I spent a lot of time walking to lunch here in the midtown area, and in the last few months, flowers, blooms, plants, and leaves came and went. God painted a new wonderful picture every day. I don't know how, but I know how wonderful, beautiful, and varied the growth was, with flowers of every color, height, and shape. Calvin mentions the lesson of this parable is to not lose heart, the Kingdom grows slowly but wonderfully through the organic power of God's Spirit.

We want instant gratification in our society; if our computer does not boot up in under one second, we are frustrated. If it takes us longer than a minute to hear a phone message, we check out, and if Amazon does not deliver in one day, we wonder what is wrong with them. We even have a platform called Instagram. But there is beauty in experiencing the organic process of life. I saw how the farmer in my church in Idaho could literally enjoy watching the grass grow. I have been at Trinity long enough to see many of our young people become young adults. It is slow, wonderful, and marvelous. I have seen my own grandchildren change and mature.

The second parable in this passage compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed. Though small, it grows into a large plant, and all the birds of heaven rest in it. The question of who the birds are has challenged preachers and commentators for centuries. Are the birds the gentiles who are new to the kingdom? Are the birds people whose souls are in flight on a spiritual migration? Are the birds the Jews who realize it is not about the law; rather, it

is about acceptance? I believe it is all of those. Most mornings when I awake, I go out to the deck to drink a cup of coffee, and there is an incredible variety of birds in the trees involved in antics, acrobatics, and awesome auditory arguments.

At my first church in Idaho, there was this young lady of about five years old whose father was an elder and whose mother was a teacher and the leader of the High School Debate Team. One day at the handshaking line after service, Kelly, the daughter, looked up at me and said, "Do you know what my mother said about you?" I replied cautiously, "No," while I noticed out of the corner of my eye her mother sprinting full speed toward us. As I looked up, she swooped down, grabbed her child with one hand, and with the other, covered the child's mouth and kept running. I learned later that the mother gave an honest and direct critique of my preaching abilities. But what happened 16 years later illustrates the power of this parable. I was at General Assembly, and I encountered a professionally dressed and articulate young lady who said, "Pastor Larry." I was mystified. She said, "I am Kelly from Idaho." She then went on to say that she was the top youth advisor in the Presbyterian denomination, crafting youth outreach and programming. She also said she had a degree in classics and was both a Latin and Greek scholar. Over the years, she had matured and now has worked with all kinds of folks everywhere. She provided shelter for young birds of all kinds leaving the nest.

Here at Trinity, we have all kinds of people on the campus, all seeking the shade, shelter, and safety of grace. Everything grew from small seeds planted when the church was founded 80 years ago. Often, a church campus is called a plant, and well ours should be, for we are an organic garden of wonders throughout the week: the Koreans, the special needs folks, the AA groups, the neuropathy group, the Nooners and the lectionary scholars, the library league, and the unhoused who are literally seeking shelter like those birds in today's parable. That variety is possible because we have always had the patience of the Presbyterians. We are certainly not fast, hip, or part of an internet fad. But we have always been here, growing slowly and gracefully. We are a wonderful garden of delights, always growing, always changing into the image of our God and Savior, and it is sweet and wonderful.