

June 14, 2015  
Pentecost III

Ezekiel 17:22-24

22 The LORD God proclaims: I myself will take one of the top branches from the tall cedar. I will pluck a tender shoot from its crown, and I myself will plant it on a very high and lofty mountain. 23 On Israel's mountainous highlands I will plant it, and it will send out branches and bear fruit. It will grow into a mighty cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it and find shelter in the shade of its boughs. 24 Then all the trees in the countryside will know that I, the LORD, bring down the tall tree and raise up the lowly tree, and make the green tree wither and the dry tree bloom. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do it.

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15 (12)

1 It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, Most High; 2 to proclaim your loyal love in the morning, your faithfulness at nighttime 3 with the ten-stringed harp, with the melody of the lyre 4 because you've made me happy, LORD, by your acts. I sing with joy because of your handiwork. 5 How awesome are your works, LORD! Your thoughts are so deep! 6 Ignorant people don't know— fools don't understand this: 7 though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers seem to blossom, they do so only to be destroyed forever. 8 But you, LORD, are exalted forever! 9 Look at your enemies, LORD! Look at how your enemies die, how all evildoers are scattered abroad! 10 But you've made me as strong as a wild ox. I'm soaked in precious ointment. 11 My eyes have seen my enemies' defeat; my ears have heard the downfall of my evil foes. 12 The righteous will spring up like a palm tree. They will grow strong like a cedar of Lebanon. 13 Those who have been replanted in the LORD's house will spring up in the courtyards of our God. 14 They will bear fruit even when old and gray; they will remain lush and fresh 15 in order to proclaim: "The LORD is righteous. He's my rock. There's nothing unrighteous in him."

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 [11-13] 14-17

6 So we are always confident, because we know that while we are living in the body, we are away from our home with the Lord. 7 We live by faith and not by sight. 8 We are confident, and we would prefer to leave the body and to be at home with the Lord. 9 So our goal is to be acceptable to him, whether we are at home or away from home. 10 We all must appear before Christ in court so that each person can be paid back for the things that were done while in the body, whether they were good or bad. 11 So we try to persuade people, since we know what it means to fear the Lord. We are well known by God, and I hope that in your heart we are well known by you as well. 12 We aren't trying to commend ourselves to you again. Instead, we are giving you an opportunity to be proud of us so that you could answer those who take pride in superficial appearance, and not in what is in the heart. 13 If we are crazy, it's for God's sake. If we are rational, it's for your sake. 14 The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. 15 He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised. 16 So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that

isn't how we know him now. 17 So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

Mark 4:26-34

26 Then Jesus said, "This is what God's kingdom is like. It's as though someone scatters seed on the ground, 27 then sleeps and wakes night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn't know how. 28 The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain. 29 Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer goes out to cut the grain because it's harvest time." 30 He continued, "What's a good image for God's kingdom? What parable can I use to explain it? 31 Consider a mustard seed. When scattered on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; 32 but when it's planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants. It produces such large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade." 33 With many such parables he continued to give them the word, as much as they were able to hear. 34 He spoke to them only in parables, then explained everything to his disciples when he was alone with them.

## **Sermon**

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

I'm ready to share a secret with you today, a secret about fishing. If you want to guarantee a catch, be sure to visit Lake Erie. Those who've fished in the North American Great Lakes in the last twenty years or so likely know what I'm talking about. You can throw your line in pretty much any part of Lake Erie, even if only for a few moments, and always leave with a catch. Probably not of fish, but of zebra mussels.

You see, through international shipping practices, zebra mussels originally hailing from Russian lakes invaded these North American waters. Without any natural predators and incredibly fit to adapt to the environment, they've become much more than a nuisance. They've taken over as a dominant species, pushing out freshwater clams and mussels natural to the Great Lakes. They carpet the undersides of docks and boats. They clog water pipes. The sharp shells regularly slice the feet of swimmers. And every time I've been fishing out in the deep water, at least once during the trip, I've dropped a line, only to pull it up a few minutes later to find the bait completely covered with a swarm of these creatures. So what if I told you that...

### ***The Kingdom of God is like zebra mussels.***

In our state, kudzu behaves in a similar way. Found from the mountains to the coast of Virginia, these species of Asian vines originally came to our continent as a part of Japanese Exhibition at the 1876 Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia. Today, it smothers native plants and literally alters the landscape of the original habitat through decomposing and recomposing the habitats. This occurs at an incredibly alarming rate, as kudzu spreads over another 150,000 acres of the U.S. every year. Again, without

natural predators and easily adaptable within our climate, kudzu seems on an unstoppable as it seeks to reshape the habitat. So what if I told you that...

***The Kingdom of God is like kudzu.***

Jesus today talks about another pesky plant, another species that shapes the landscape and swarms the ecosystem. He talks of a mustard seed, one of the smallest, growing into the greatest of plants. Now, here's where Bible translation gets tricky. We know that mustard plants in Israel grow differently than our own, and does in fact grow much larger than ours like this image, but we also know that they're nowhere near the biggest of plants, neither worldwide nor in Israel. So what is Jesus talking about here? The Greek word here, *megas*, need not mean greatest as in height or in weight. It may also mean extent to which something grows, the spread or the influence of the thing. It can mean something like the size of its invasiveness, the scope of its reach.

That's at least part of what Jesus is getting. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed because one millimeter of a seed can start an unstoppable invasion. It is *megas*, massive, in its reach, in its penetration of our world. Like zebra mussels, God's kingdom arrives unexpectedly and immediately establishes a beachhead to enter the entire region. Like kudzu it grows to cover the old and transform the landscape into something entirely new, perhaps a new heaven and a new earth. Like the mustard seed, one millimeter of life may become a plant, not the largest in size, but one with a great impact, one that continually spawns over and over again in relentless pursuit to become part of all the fields of our world. In Jesus Christ, God planted the seeds for the kingdom's growth. We, the church, the people of God, are the fruits of that seed, the vines tied to the branch of Christ Jesus, the good fruit meant to last.

We've begun a practice at council meetings of beginning with a prayer and then reflecting on two questions: Where have you seen God at work in the world? Where do you want to see God at work? One of the things that's come up in our last few meetings, from different people each time, is that we've seen God at work doing new things in our church, growing not only our membership, attendance, and giving, but also growing our outreach ministries, our work outside the walls of the church, our impact in the New River Valley. Another thing that's come up is that we want more people to know about the new life we've found in Christ. We want others to see what God is up to, and to become a part of this community that God is using to transform our world. We want the Holy Spirit to plant the seeds of Jesus in the world around us, not just to grow our membership, but to grow the Kingdom of God.

As the seed of God's Kingdom is planted, we must, like zebra mussels, colonize the places to which God carries us, not only making it our home but shaping its future. We must spread like vines to not only cover the old, but to bring on an entirely new landscape. As the kudzu of the kingdom God calls us to reshape this environment by living and sharing the love of Christ. Though the world seems satisfied with violence and oppression, with inequality and prejudice, God calls us as the fruit of the kingdom to plant seeds of justice, to spawn a new ecosystem of peace.

If we want people to know about this community's good work, we must become that kind of persistent plant, the mustard seeds that fertilizes every field we come to with the name of Jesus. This means that we can't be quiet about our faith, about our God, about why we live the way that we do. New plants will only grow if new seeds are planted and fertilized, nurtured and fed. New growth will only occur if the fruit that we

bear enters the soil of our community to bring to life even more evidence of God's Kingdom.

Here's the thing about zebra mussels, about kudzu, about mustard seeds. If they stay where they're from, they never spread. They never realize their power, their influence, their potential impact. They need to enter the field to find abundant life. If we stay in these walls, silent about the work of God amongst us, then the seed God planted in this place cannot fully bloom in our community. To see the Kingdom of God grow, we need to enter the mission fields of Radford, Farlawn, and New River, of Montgomery and Pulaski counties, of the whole New River Valley. We need to embody the insistent desire to connect people not with a world shaped by sin, but with one reshaped by the relentless love of God. If the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, then we must become the blooms that announce with sight and smell that the reign of God is here and now. We must take root upon the mountains and plains to announce that the flora and fauna and all parts of creation can find a friend in Jesus, whose kingdom will reshape the world and redeem all things.

What this means, then, is that we must take risks. We must realize that these walls don't silo our lives away from the rest of the week. We can't continue to compartmentalize our "church lives" away from our "family lives" and "work lives" and whatever lives we live. New life of Christ is meant for life to the full! Fully invading our families and our churches! Fully impacting our work and play. Fully consuming our sleeping and waking. Fully guiding our stillness and excitement. Fully shaping our contemplation and activation. We must grow like kudzu, far beyond our comfort zones. We must spread like zebra mussels, never settled too long in one place and never

settled that some parts remain unexplored. We must bloom like fields of mustard, shading the whole world with the brightness of God's Kingdom.

So, above all, we need to talk and live like Jesus matters. Today, you have in your seats connection cards. These are meant for sharing, to be small blooms that point to the presence of God's Kingdom. I invite you each to share at least one card this week, to spread out a bit and connect our lives in church with our lives in the world. The idea is simple. God's up to good stuff here. Across the Spectrum is growing in attendance and partnership, so much so that we'll need to grow into the sanctuary as soon as the lift is completed. There's great energy around Highlander Lutherans at RU and even talk about developing another outreach to NRCC. Our building is becoming accessible to people of all abilities. Clyde's leading the charge to bring in a renowned poet for a reading in our new sanctuary and a workshop on our own poetry. We're continuing to receive donations for LWR health kits and food stuff for Beans and Rice. God's at work amongst us, and not just inside these walls!

So, then, let's share these cards along with stories of how God is at work, about where we see God's kingdom reshaping the landscape of our community. Let's invite others to become a part of that, as we ourselves become reshaped by the kingdom of God. As one blogger recently said, let's say the things that people need to hear but often don't find in our churches: *Welcome. You can find God here. We're incomplete without your presence and your gifts amongst us.* That's kingdom language, and that's kingdom truth: Even as we love our community, we're always incomplete without the presence and perspectives of others. That's kingdom hospitality. That's God's kingdom reshaping our world from isolation into hospitality, one that welcomes people into the work of God and sees God already at work in them. The kingdom of God is like zebra

mussels, kudzu, mustard seeds. We are citizens of God's kingdom. Let's live lives that promote the transformation of this world into the new one. As Paul says today, the old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! The Kingdom of God is the new thing, the new work of God amongst us. Let's help others to look and see. Amen.