

PENTECOST 4B – 6/17/18
The Kingdom of God is Like Scattering Seeds
(Mark 4:26-34)

Father's Day... A little boy was once asked to define Father's Day and he put it this way: "It's just like Mother's Day, only you don't spend as much money on the present." I also read that, some years ago, Illinois Bell had reported that the volume of long-distance calls made on Father's Day was actually growing *faster* than the number of long-distance calls made on Mother's Day. In fact, the company even had to apologize for the delay in compiling and reporting these statistics. But, you see, it seems that the extra billing of calls to those fathers was what was slowing things down. In other words, most of them were "collect" calls.

But there's no question, however, that fathers are important, terribly important – just as important as mothers are, in fact. Because study after study has confirmed that the most favorable and most stable environment for raising children is a household in which there are *two* parents who are *both* present and active.

On the other hand, someone once noticed that the word "father" appears in the dictionary just *before* the word "fatigued," and just *after* the word "fathead." So I guess, you might say, that fatherhood *is* something of a mixed bag.

In fact, no less of an authority than Mark Twain, himself, is reported to have said, "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be

twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had actually learned in those seven years!”

Fathers are a different breed, to be sure. And being one myself, I can testify to this firsthand. We come in all shapes and sizes, have different personalities and mannerisms, and fulfill the fatherly role in a myriad of ways. But what *is* a father?

The late Paul Harvey once wrote: *A father is a thing that is forced to endure childbirth without an anesthetic... A father is a thing that growls when it feels good – and laughs very loud when it’s scared half to death... A father never feels entirely worthy of the worship in a child’s eyes. He’s never quite the hero his daughter thinks, never quite the man his son believes him to be – and this worries him sometimes... Fathers are what give daughters away to other men who aren’t nearly good enough so they can (then) have grandchildren who are smarter than anybody else’s.*

And fathers, to be sure, are often misunderstood. Mostly because they... we are different than mothers.

A young mother once went looking for her husband and found him down the hall in the baby’s room gazing at their newborn child who was asleep in the crib. The mother could tell that he was captivated by the scene as he stood there looking at the sleeping infant. She was so touched that finally she tiptoed up behind him and slipped her arm through his and asked, “Honey, what are you thinking about?” He paused for a second and then said, “For the life of me, I just can’t understand how they’re able to make a crib like this for only \$89.95!”

Fathers, of course, typically have to go to work which is sometimes hard for young children to understand – especially when they also have to bring *some* of that work home with them at night. A young boy kept seeing his father bring work home just about every night of the week. Finally, the little boy asked why. His daddy explained that he had so much work to do that he couldn't always finish it all during the day. Prompting his first grade son, who quickly associated this with something he had observed in school, to remark, "In that case, daddy, why don't they just put you in a slower group."

Finally (and my own daughters could appreciate this one), there's the story about the three little boys in the schoolyard who were bragging about who had the better father. The first boy says, "My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a poem, and they give him a hundred dollars."

So the second boy says, "That's nothing. My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a song, and they give *him* a thousand dollars."

Prompting the third boy to say, "My Dad is even better than that. He scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a sermon, and then it takes *four people* just to collect all the money!"

But my favorite story about fatherhood, though, is the one about the new dad who had just made himself the perfect sandwich for their backyard picnic: a thick slab of juicy ham, crisp lettuce, and plenty of light brown, Grey Poupon mustard. His mouth was literally watering as he picked it up for a first-bite. Just then, however, his wife appeared at his side and said, "Here, honey, could you hold the baby for just a second?"

The dad had his son balanced between his left elbow and shoulder, and was again reaching for his sandwich, when he noticed a streak of mustard on his fingers. Now he *loved* mustard! So instinctively he leaned over and licked it off...

Only... it *wasn't* mustard! You see, his wife had neglected to mention that the reason *why* she had handed their six-week old over to him was that the baby had just filled his diaper and she needed to go back inside to get the diaper bag in order to change him!

Later his wife teased him and said, "Now you *know* why they call that mustard... "poop-on."

Well, that's enough about Father's Day, I suppose. But, interestingly enough, that reference to *mustard* leads us directly into today's gospel lesson, doesn't it? (How's *that* for a segue!) It's the Parable of the Mustard Seed; the second of the two parables in our reading. However, to understand it, I need to tell you a story...

Some years ago, Jeanette and I and the kids broke with tradition and, instead of going camping for our summer vacation, we decided, instead, to rent a "chalet" overlooking the town of Gatlinburg and the Smoky Mountains down in Tennessee. And I'll never forget when we turned off the highway and onto the winding road that led up the mountain to where our chalet was located.

All along the roadside, you see, and even extending far back into the tress and fields there were these thick, green vines with clusters of wide leaves growing *everywhere*, and on *every-thing*, and *not* just on the ground. In other words, this stuff not only completely covered the

ground, but it also wound its way up tree trunks, street signs, telephone poles, and even the sides of barns and garages. It was like suddenly being transported to a strange planet with really weird plant life!

And even though this was our first sighting of this weird vine, it was not to be our last. In fact, everywhere we went down there in the Smokey's this stuff was not only growing, it was *thriving*. Thriving to the point where, in some areas, it seemed like it was threatening to completely take over the entire landscape. *Nothing* stood in its way! Believe me, if something out in the fields, or on the roadside, wasn't moving – this stuff *literally* just grew right over top of it.

Naturally we were curious. So, the first chance we got, we looked for some information about this strange-looking vine and it wasn't too hard to find. Because, just as we suspected, it was virtually taking over almost everywhere.

Came to find out that this stuff is actually called *kudzu*. And it turns out that it's a "climbing, semi-woody, perennial vine in the *pea* family." And it *will*, in fact, grow and take over everything in its path – if you let it.

According to the National Park Service, kudzu, if left unchecked, "will kill or degrade other plants by smothering them under a solid blanket of leaves, or by (tightly encircling) woody stems or even tree trunks, and *even* by breaking branches or uprooting entire trees and shrubs through the sheer force of its weight." Once established, kudzu grows *rapidly*, extending as much as 60 feet per season at a rate of about one foot per day. The individual vines may extend anywhere from 32-100 feet, and they emerge from massive "tap" roots which are more than 8 inches in

diameter, reaching depths of up to 12 feet, and weighing as much as 400 pounds apiece. And as many as 30 vines can grow from just a single one of these roots.

And, of course, what's fascinating, given that kudzu *is* so prolific, especially in the Southeast (although it's been found as far north as Pennsylvania as well) is that it's *not* a native plant. Rather, it actually comes from Asia, and was only introduced to the United States in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

At first, because of its large leaves and sweet-smelling blooms, American gardeners used it for ornamental purposes. Later, during the Great Depression, the Soil Conservation Service promoted kudzu for erosion control. Young men were actually given work planting kudzu through the Civilian Conservation Corps, and farmers were paid as much as eight dollars an acre as an incentive to plant fields of the vine in the 1940's.

The *problem*, though, as we observed for ourselves, is that it grows *too* well! Better, actually, than it does in its native environment even. The warm, sunny climate of the southeastern United States is just *perfect* for kudzu and, unfortunately, its natural insect enemies were *not* brought to the U.S. along with it. So, despite its initial welcome, by 1972, the Department of Agriculture had finally declared kudzu to be a *weed*. But *eradicating* it has proven to be quite a challenge...

Now *what* – you may be asking yourselves – does this have to do with our faith and, specifically, with today's gospel lesson? Well, as we heard, Jesus once compared the kingdom of God to a “mustard seed.”

And we're all probably familiar with the traditional interpretation of this parable: a small, little seed that grows up to be a great, big tree. Well, in the same way, he implies, the kingdom of God *also* starts off small – with just a handful of disciples and followers of Jesus – but it continues to grow larger and larger, even to this day.

And that much is true... as far as it goes. But Jesus' parable; if you understand the *true* nature of the mustard plant, goes even further.

First of all, as the parable itself seems to indicate, the mustard seed does not *really* grow up to be a tree at all. It actually only grows up to be a very large shrub or bush. Not a very impressive sight if you want to emphasize the “greatness” of the kingdom, which apparently *wasn't* Jesus' intent, however.

Secondly, the mustard plant was actually considered to be a “weed” in ancient Palestine. On top of that, when Jesus mentions that the birds of the air will come and make their nests in its branches, this is actually *not* a good thing. A bird-attracting weed was one of the *last* things a farmer in ancient times wanted growing next to his fields.

Moreover, the mustard plant, like so many other weeds, is almost impossible to get rid of once it's been sown... Again, sort of like *kudzu*. Which is exactly my point. Who today has ever heard of the mustard plant? But if you've ever traveled across the southeastern portion of our country, you haven't been able to miss or ignore that fast-growing weed called “kudzu.” And that's *precisely* the kind of plant Jesus had in mind when he talked about the mustard seed.

So, in the end, Jesus' point is not so much that something great comes from something so small. It's more like this: the kingdom of God is like a rapidly-growing weed that you just can't keep from spreading once it's been planted. In other words, *nothing* can stand in the way of God's kingdom. Like kudzu, the kingdom will grow up, over, and *around* anything that stands in its way. It's irrepressible...

Now back to the *first* parable in today's reading for just a moment...

As Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota points out, "No other Gospel contains this parable. Probably because it's boring," he says. It "has all the drama of an ordinary elementary-school life sciences textbook. There are no surprises. Everything proceeds according to plan. Jesus speaks about seeds and what they are supposed to do. They grow and produce. Moreover," says Professor Skinner, "they grow and produce *without* your help *or* your intricate knowledge of germination or photosynthesis..., thank you very much."

In other words, he says, "the reign of God will take root... (And) it will grow gradually and automatically... It will grow perhaps so subtly that you won't even *notice*," he says, "until at last it produces its intended fruit."

...We live in a time when many Christians are despairing that the church is in a downward spiral from which it may not recover. And, to be sure, there are visible and worrying signs of that decline all around us; smaller congregations (especially in mainline denominations, that is), lower weekly worship attendance, fewer volunteers and active participants, and last, but not least, the difficulties that many churches are facing in

simply meeting their financial obligations and commitments. Some doomsayers even predict that many, if not most, of today's church bodies and with them, of course, many of their individual congregations, will simply not exist by the year 2050, or thereabouts. A pretty sobering, even depressing, thought...

But then we have today's gospel reading. Right from the very beginning, apparently, Jesus knew that *sometimes* the going will get tough for those who dare to follow him as his disciples. It will not always be easy or pleasant. There will be many challenges and setbacks along the way.

So here's the thing, he says. Consider this: the kingdom of God is a lot like planting seeds. First, the seeds don't depend at all on you. They will do their thing, the thing they were created to do, without your help or assistance. Simply scatter enough of them, and they will sprout and grow on their own. In fact, they will grow so gradually and automatically that all, but the most observant of you, will not even notice it happening.

And, secondly, the kingdom of God will grow like an irrepressible weed; just like a mustard plant... or, as I say, kudzu. In other words, you can try to cut it back, burn it out, do everything in your power to eradicate it, but nothing – absolutely nothing – will work. You will be powerless to stop it. It will just keep growing... up, over, and around, anything that stands in its way.

That's what the kingdom of God is like, says Jesus. Don't worry about its future. Don't be afraid. After all, in the end, it's not up to you. And,

more than that, nothing you do – or anyone else for that matter – will ever stop God’s kingdom from being fulfilled. You can count on it!

According to the Bible, the kingdom of God will simply *smother* the evil and hatred of this world with grace, mercy, and forgiveness. It will eventually encircle and infiltrate every person, every institution, and every society. And it will break down the stranglehold that sin and death have on human lives through the sheer weight of God’s love!

Once it was established on this earth through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has continued to grow unabated. It has typically grown so gradually that many did not even see or realize it was happening. And it has grown automatically and inexorably toward its ultimate goal of establishing God’s gracious reign over all the earth...

It is certainly true that the church – as we have always known it, at least – is in decline. But it’s *not* true that this spells the end. So many times before, throughout the Bible and throughout church history, God has simply done a new thing. And I am convinced that this, too, is one of those times.

As God once spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Simply put, the kingdom of God is a lot like scattering seeds... and then standing back and watching them grow. Amen.

