

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Sermon: Bloom and Grow  
Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook  
Sunday, July 30, 2017

**A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

<sup>31</sup> He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. <sup>32</sup> Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

<sup>33</sup> He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

<sup>44</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

<sup>45</sup> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup> When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

<sup>51</sup> "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.

"Yes," they replied.

<sup>52</sup> He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

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One of the things I had to learn when I first moved to Atlanta, Georgia, was that “Kudzu” is a bad word. A very bad word and a very bad plant. People in Georgia and across the Southeast hate Kudzu with a passion. You see, Kudzu is one of the fastest growing invasive plants ever to make it to our shores. It covers fields and hillsides, it covers trees and whole forests. If the house is abandoned, Kudzu will move in. It is a constant struggle against the Kudzu.

Ironically, Kudzu was originally brought to the U. S. about a hundred years ago as a means of controlling land erosion. But talk about too much of a good thing. By the 1950’s the agriculture folks knew there was a problem. By the 1970’s the problem was out of hand; the plant had won and there was no turning back. These days, the authorities in the worst-affected areas spare no effort or expense to eradicate Kudzu. Or at least to try to stop it from spreading.

I think one would be hard-pressed to make the case with my friends in Georgia that Kudzu might have any beneficial uses. In fact, however, in some parts of Southeast Asia Kudzu is considered a food crop! In its native China, Kudzu is considered one of the “fifty fundamental herbs” and is used as an herbal remedy for the treatment of alcohol-related problems, including liver disease. There are even some hints that it may show promise for treating migraines, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, and even cancer! Wouldn’t that be a twist—if medical science discovered the ultimate cure for cancer in the plant that our neighbors in the South are spending millions of dollars to eradicate!

So, let me introduce you to the Mustard Seed. For Jesus to use a mustard seed as a means of describing God’s kingdom would have been about as shocking in that day as telling a native of Georgia that Kudzu might become the next miracle cure. It just doesn’t compute. Mustard is just about as prodigious as Kudzu. Once it takes hold of a field, it eventually takes over the whole place. It’s just about impossible to eradicate. Modern farmers hate it because it gets in their crops. Ranchers hate it because it irritates the eyes of their livestock. What possible good could come from mustard seed? It’s a weed; it’s invasive; once it takes hold, you can’t get rid of it.

We American Christians tend to think of God’s kingdom a bit more triumphantly than a mustard bush. Surely, God’s Reign has more substance to it than comparing it to shrubs and bushes and the smallest of all seeds? Mustard bushes are small and squatty. They do not have large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in their shade like Jesus said.

I have no doubt that Jesus knew what he was talking about and so did his listeners. They likely knew he was parodying the imagery of Ezekiel who said, “Under [the cedar tree] every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind” (17:23). Nothing like ironic humor from Jesus to remind us what God’s Way looks like and how it acts.

Yet we tend to want something much grander, much bigger for the Kingdom of God. We want empire-building and theocracy. We want control and power. We want to be able to tell other people what to do and how to live their lives. Every day you can read a newspaper and blog posts criticizing unauthorized immigration, and many of those blogs quote the Bible in support of anger, fear, and hostility against those so-called foreigners. Or you read the name of God is invoked in support of drilling new oil wells in ever-riskier places on this planet or even on protected and sacred land, or scripture to support of everyone carrying their own personal assault rifle – as long as you are a white person carrying

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a gun, or vitriol against same-sex marriage, or banning transgender patriots from serving in the military, or ... on and on.

Jesus comes along and says, "For Pete's sake! You've got it all wrong! God's Way is not the big cedar trees of Lebanon. God is not into power and spectacle, or flying banners, beating drums, and shouting and yelling. God's Way is a mustard bush, small seeds, or a little leaven in flour. God's way is working with the weeds and transforming them into usefulness; God's way is shaking us out of our complacency in order to make room for greater joy and greater love."

My Uncle Mel, my mother's older brother, loved clocks – mechanical clocks, antique clocks. He spent a considerable amount of energy looking for clocks. He spent an equally considerable amount of money acquiring those clocks. He spent more than 50 years of his life finding, buying, repairing, maintaining and selling those clocks and organs. Last estimate I heard was that he had over a hundred clocks that old house when he died.

One day a man had come to deliver heating oil or diesel fuel for the farm machinery and he had come into the kitchen to get my uncle to sign for the shipment. Just as he prepared to leave, all 100 clocks went off. He was so amazed that he asked if he could stay until the next hour so that he could hear them all go off again. Nothing could have pleased my uncle more. He took the man on a tour of the house, showing his grandfather clocks and mantle clocks and table clocks and railroad clocks, etc. etc. And when he ran out of clocks, he sat down and played a few hymns on one of the pump organs he had restored.

The time came for the clocks to chime and the driver of the delivery truck sat as if in a trance, listening with his heart as well as his ears. He got up from the table and said to Uncle Mel, "I have several more stops to make. Would it be all right if I brought my wife and children back tonight so they can hear this?" And, of course, Uncle Mel said yes. When the man returned that night, he sat through another couple of sessions of chimes ringing. And after that, he always timed his visits to make sure he got to hear the chimes go off.

I thought of my uncle and all of his clocks when I read today's Gospel lesson because Uncle Mel found most of his clocks at yard sales and estate auctions and garbage dumps. He discovered things no one saw value in and knew what they were and made them his own. The deliveryman also discovered something many other people knew about but paid little attention to. I had been in that house many times when all hundred clocks went off at the same time; I was 15, I just complained that I couldn't hear the TV. But this man knew that here was something unique and valuable, something to be treasured.

The kingdom of heaven is like that, Jesus says. It is not something you can figure out or go out and find. You don't shop for it at a store or order it at Amazon. You can't decide you're going to get the kingdom through seven easy steps you heard on an infomercial or a pop-up ad you saw online. And you certainly can't legislate your way into the kingdom of heaven so everything lines up in your favor and makes all of your friends rich.

No, the kingdom of heaven is more like something that you stumble upon while doing something else, such as delivering heating oil, or plowing a field, or casually walking through a yard sale.

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The origins of God's realm are tiny, sometimes almost invisible, yet, once it gets started, it is unstoppable.

Think about it. How would you describe the Kingdom of Heaven and the realm of God in your day-to-day life? Try it. What would you say?

I was at the grocery store Friday night and saw a bag of red grapes and I thought to myself, "The kingdom of heaven is like one red grape beginning to mold at the bottom of the bag. When I leave it in the light overnight, the mold grows and next day every grape in the bag is moldy." That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a Meme that says, "Give us the exact same healthcare as Congress or give Congress the same healthcare they give us." One small sentence, one truth, which goes viral and shapes the whole the conversation around affordable, accessible, comprehensive health care.

How am I doing? Can you think of a way to describe the Kingdom of Heaven? Where in your life have you encountered the small thing, the fleeting moment, maybe it was some bad mojo or a simple phrase that then took on a life of its own?

Maybe it was the day you said "I do," and "I do" became "I can, I will, I'm here, and you matter." Or maybe it was the day you said "No," finally setting the boundaries you should have set a long time ago, finally acknowledging that you cannot be everything to everyone and still be yourself, finally storing up some of that good energy for your own particular passion.

How about this – the Kingdom of Heaven is the contemporary art installation of Tracey Emin entitled, "My Bed." Tracey's art was displayed in the Tate Museum in London – that's where I saw it many years ago. It was given a room all its own because of its size. You step into the room and you see, literally, a bed: rumpled sheets, pillows, pajamas and a towel—all worn, unkempt, like they are ready to go into the wash. Alongside on the floor are vodka bottles, slippers, underwear, empty cigarette packets and a white fluffy toy. When the work was first shown, it caused great media furor – obscene, disgusting, that's not art! It was eventually sold to Charles Saatchi for £150,000. Then, earlier this year the art piece was auctioned for a staggering £2.2 million.

You see, the kingdom of heaven is like Tracey Emin's art installation *My Bed*. All who see it, judge it. To some it is harrowingly frank, moving and authentic; to others it is a sham, distasteful and disgusting. No one who sees it is indifferent; it draws from each condemnation or praise. Yet it is riveting, charismatic, evocative and it blazes an image in your memory.

That's the Kingdom of Heaven. God's realm of justice and peace and freedom in this world is something unexpected. It works contrary to our expectations. If you blink, you might miss the tiniest of seeds that will still yet bloom and grow. But God is working on the long-game here. God is working on you and me and the whole world all at the same time through unexpected transformations.

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Rather like how Kudzu might be a solution rather than a problem. Rather like how mustard seeds might be a safe refuge for birds and animals. Rather like how chiming clocks become a source of joy and inspiration.

We get stuck thinking that money talks. Might makes right. Nice guys finish last. Those who lay down their lives for others become doormats. Humility means weakness. Mercy means being taken advantage. In a world that works like that, Jesus' vision of a new realm that would bring justice and peace and freedom seems ludicrous. And, dear friends, that's the Kingdom of Heaven and that's the realm of God.

Amen.