

Worship Service “*Growing Wise*”

Pentecost 9, Sunday, Year A

30th July 2023

1 Kings 3:5-12 NRSVUE / Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 NRSVUE

Prelude

Opening Music

[For the Beauty of the Earth](#)

performed by Mutual Kumquat

Words by Folliott S. Pierpont, melody by Conrad Kocher. Used with permission. To check out more from Mutual Kumquat and other groups with Chris Good, check out their website at: <https://chrisgoodmusic.com/>

Welcome/Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *To God be the Glory* 102

Call to Worship (responsive)

One: What mysteries there are in God’s world!

All: We, so sophisticated, stand in awe at the wonders of the natural world.

One: We look at the tiniest of seeds and wonder what will happen

All: From that small seed will grow a large shrub.

One: Although we consider our gifts to be small and insignificant,

All: God will use our gifts in miraculous ways. We praise the God of small seeds and mighty power as we join in worship together.

Invocation

God of small seeds and mighty plants, you take our meager lives and with your love cause them to produce acts of loving kindness for you in this world.

You hear our cries and find us when we are lost and wandering in fear. You bring us home with you so that we may be made whole, rejoicing in your goodness.

Help us to joyfully serve you all our days, knowing that you are always watching over us.

Prepare our hearts to receive your word and our spirits to respond in eagerness to serve you. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Our First Testament reading this morning tells of Solomon’s request of wisdom from God. As we listen to these words from First Kings, let’s think about where we seek our wisdom as we discern the will of God.

First Testament Reading - 1 Kings 3:5-12 NRSVUE

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I should give you."

And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you, and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.

And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.

And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.

Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

God said to him, "Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right,

I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Teach me Your ways, O God, that I may come down from my heights and be open to the same Spirit who moved over the face of the waters in the first day of creation and moves also over the chaos of this time to fashion a day like this, a world like ours, a life like mine, a kin-dom acting as leaven in the bread of earth. And make me aware of the miracles of life, of warm and cold, of starkness and order, of screaming wind and impenetrable silences, and of the unfathomable mystery of amazing grace in which I am kept.

Teach me Your ways, O God, that I may praise You for all the surprising, ingenious ways You bless me, and for all the wondrous gifts You give me, along with all the pain and joy I sustain.

Teach me Your ways, O God, that I may accept my own talent openly, nurture it hopefully, develop it faithfully, and give it freely.

Teach me Your ways, O God, that I may love Your kindness and practice it toward the hungry of the world, the poor and sick, and oppressed, that I may learn the healing humility that comes from You.

Teach me Your ways, O God, so that my heart is flooded with Your mercy—emptying it of what makes it firmly opposed to Your ways, so that it beats more in rhythm with You and pounds greatly for Your kin-dom. Amen.

Jesus tells several parables in our reading from Matthew this morning. As you listen to these stories, think about what they have in common, and what they may be saying about how God works in the world around us.

Hymn *Open My Eyes, That I May See* 517

Gospel Reading Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 NRSVUE

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;

it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;

on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous

and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.”

And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Message – *Growing Wise*

A gardener, prompted by curiosity, counted the seed pods on a medium-sized mustard plant. There were 85. The average number of seeds in each pod was eight. Since two crops in a given year could be matured, the gardener figured that it was possible in the interim between February and mid-October to produce a yield of 462,000 seeds, all from one original plant. That's quite a load of seeds. It's no wonder that weeds are often the bane of many a farmer and homeowner's existence. They seem to spread like wildfire and threaten to choke out our food crops, or take over our well manicured lawns. We pull them, spray chemicals to kill them, but they just keep coming back.

When we see overgrown lots in our own neighborhoods, our first reaction is often to see such scenes as places in need of a lot of work, to get back to the orderly, kept ideal we have of what is desirable and beautiful to behold. Yet in our parable this morning from Matthew, that's what Jesus is talking about. What we may not know today, but what the early listeners hearing this parable would have most likely understood, is that the mustard plant is a weed that grows like a bush and spreads. It's a very invasive weed.

Jesus is comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a plant that will constantly and inevitably keep growing and spreading. Have you ever seen ivy on an old house, taking it over completely? That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Jesus uses this imagery to illustrate how the Kingdom of Heaven will spread like the most invasive of weeds, gradually overtaking the carefully planned and tended fields of humankind.

That's an interesting perspective to consider. In farming, crops are planted and fertilized according to the wisdom and experience of generations of farmers. From years of trial and error, these are the accepted methods of rotation, water, and nurture that have yielded the best results, and are accepted as common knowledge and common sense. Yet we can carry that metaphor further to think about what we think of as common sense, as just the ways things are done.

Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of Heaven often acts in the opposite way to what the world thinks is right and normal. Instead of crops, He lifts up invasive weeds as the model. Plants that will invade and choke out what we would normally value as good and right. He makes a similar statement in his next parable about yeast.

When we think of yeast, most of us would picture a packet of powder that we pick up at the store, mix with some water, and add to flour, salt, and shortening, and make loaves of bread.

Yet for his listeners in his time, leavening was often viewed negatively. Leavening was something that people understood in scripture as unclean or evil. There were no packets of yeast to buy at the store. In order to make yeast, you had to let bread or fruit peels go bad, just bad enough to get yeasty but not fully rot. It wasn't a pleasant process. Then, as today, in that part of the world, they eat mostly different types of flatbread that don't require leavening and yeast. Yet just a tiny bit of that yeast can make a big batch of good flour rise and bubble. But while mustard bushes and yeasty risen dough are the end results of the Kingdom of Heaven spreading everywhere, it's important not to lose sight of how it all starts. The mustard seed is a very tiny seed, one of the tiniest. It takes the smallest amount of yeast to start a chain reaction that can make a full loaf of bread. That's the first point that Jesus is trying to make here.

Too often we focus on the Kin-dom at the end of our road, that we neglect the work we're called to in this life. To live in such a way that we spread little bits of the Kin-dom where we are on this Earth. Jesus is telling us that we should spread our share of these tiny seeds, these little bits of yeast, and they slowly spread out into other places. Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom starts out small like a mustard seed and grows into a tree that shelters and nurtures life around it. When that small mustard seed starts growing, it has an advantage, because it can grow in and around the landscape, sheltering those beneath it and giving a place to perch for those above it.

This, too, is how the gospel is spread in communities where seeds, as tiny as they may be, are spread in their present landscape. A small sprout here and there, and suddenly the place is alive with people engaged in kin-dom work being nurtured by the spread of the gospel and the Kin-dom drawing near. Those seeds that have the most growth often aren't what we think of as evangelizing, going door to door for example. Proclaiming the gospel takes many forms that aren't verbal. As Francis of Assisi used to say, "Preach the Gospel at all times, when necessary, use words." It's getting out in the community and seeing what weeds grow best. It's finding the needs and meeting them. It's being a valuable member of one's community that actively makes a difference while not hiding the motivation of the Gospel behind those actions. Yet what is defined as success in God's Kingdom is often not what we're taught by our culture to value. We might think, "Oh I'm just part of a little church. We can't do much, so why bother?"

As Lou F. McNeil in his essay on Christianity in Appalachia puts it, "When one's thinking begins with the parish and its members, rather than the gospel itself, it is likely that ministry and planning will not get beyond the parish and its membership." As I look at congregational profiles across our denomination, one consistent goal they all have is growth. Yet so many hesitate to do anything outside the church doors.

The quote I referenced about Christianity in Appalachia reminds me of the Episcopal church I preached at occasionally in eastern Kentucky. It was a good Sunday if we had 8 or 10 people show up. Yet that church ran a food bank that provided for hundreds of people. They had a

thrift shop next to the church that often supplied those same people with donated furniture or appliances for cheap. They served soup and sandwiches every month to struggling students at the nearby community college. They found a way to spread the Kingdom on a shoe string budget, with a half time priest that was only there two Sundays a month, which by the way is how this Brethren pastor got roped into preaching on the other two Sundays for free. The focus of the church should be spreading the Gospel, seeking God's direction in what seeds of the Kingdom we are called to plant. Growth will follow as God directs.

As Paul models in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow." We need to be out there, planting seeds, or recognizing the seeds already planted by God that don't meet our expectations of what kin-dom growth looks like.

Like many a homeowner who fights the troublesome dandelions taking over the yard, what we may see as an annoyance may be the very opportunity we are being given. The homeless person on the doorstep may be a mustard seed of the kin-dom, not something that needs to be pulled up and discarded. Like Solomon in our passage from 1 Kings today, we need to seek wisdom and discernment from God, not necessarily the "common sense" we are used to. But it's important to know the difference between wisdom and intelligence.

Which reminds me of a story I heard once. A minister, a Boy Scout, and a computer expert were the only passengers on a small plane. The pilot came back to the cabin and said that the plane was going down but there were only three parachutes and four people. The pilot added, "I should have one of the parachutes because I have a wife and three small children." So he took one and jumped. The computer whiz said, "I should have one of the parachutes because I am the smartest man in the world and everyone needs me." So he took one and jumped. The minister turned to the Boy Scout and with a sad smile said, "You are young and I have lived a rich life, so you take the remaining parachute, and I'll go down with the plane." The boy Scout said, "Relax, Reverend, the smartest man in the world just picked up my knapsack and jumped out! The one with the PHD isn't necessarily the one with the greatest wisdom.

Sometimes it's the one with the simple approach, untainted by complex methods of reasoning, that better discerns God's will. Sometimes we don't know what to do with the section of God's Kingdom that we've been given. Even right now, we are in flux – we don't know what the future holds for the church. Across all denominations, attendance is shrinking. Clearly something needs to change. What that change will be is yet to be determined. It might not look like what we think it should look like, but we must trust that God will lead us to what we need to be to continue to spread the Kingdom throughout our world, like yeast mixing in bread dough.

When we spread our yeast or seeds, we build relationships. We share the love of Christ. We get to know people. We discern, through God, how we can best serve them. That is how we begin to determine what the future of the body of Christ looks like. For we follow a God that

uses what others think is unusable. A God that calls us to love others with reckless abandon. A God that sees in us what others cannot see, whose work often disrupts our nice orderly gardens. A God that calls us to use our God-given talents to their fullest extent, like Solomon. By living this way, we become part of what the Kingdom of Heaven is made, the yeast that makes it rise. And like yeast, realizing that new growth is often nourished and fertilized by the remains of what came before. May we seek to find those opportunities, those weeds growing around us, and discern the best way to support new growth. Amen.

Call to Serve

Our God calls us to seek and find the hints of the Kin-dom in our world, and to nurture its growth among us. We will use our gifts, tithes and offerings to rebuild the body of Christ.

Let's give some thought to what we might do in the coming days to better see the unconventional growth of God's kin-dom in the world around us, and even within our community of faith, and how we might encourage that growth.

A Time for Reflection

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

Grow these gifts in your love, O God.

Bless our offerings, our hearts and our hopes in your love
To make us worthy of your work for your Kin-dom in heaven,
And among us here, even now.

Fill these gifts and each of us with your goodness. Amen.

Hymn *God of Grace and God of Glory* 366

Benediction

Go forth in Wisdom, in hope, in courage.

With hearts open to recognize the signs of the reign of God in our midst,
and courage to create more space for grace and growth in our lives and our world.
Amen.

Postlude