

July 30, 2017
Matthew 13:24-31
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“Pernicious”

Good morning. There was a couple who decided they needed to eat healthier. One of their commitments to their diet was to eat more locally grown produce. So next weekend, the wife sent her husband to the downtown farmer’s market with strict instructions to get only organically-grown produce. The man approached a gardener with an array of fresh vegetables and said, “I’m looking for vegetables for my wife. Have any of these been sprayed with poisonous chemicals?” And the gardener said, “Nope. You’ll have to do that yourself.”

I want to talk a little bit about gardening this morning: I know -- and many of you do, too -- from my experience in our Seed to Feed garden that there are a number of folks here at Creekside who know a lot more about gardening than I do. I’m not concerned by this, because what I *really* want to talk about is the kingdom of God, and I figure that if Jesus can talk about God’s kingdom as a garden or a field, than I can too. We don’t know how much Jesus knew about gardening, but I believe he knew more about the kingdom of God than anyone before or since.

Garden similes -- that is, comparing something to a garden -- are certainly nothing new. Cultivating plants for food for people and livestock is a practice that’s been around for a long, long time. It’s not a new literary device to equate someone’s spiritual life and growth to plant life and growth. Personally, I’d rather be fruitful than vegetative. Some of you have read William P. Young’s bestseller *The Shack*, or seen the recent movie adaptation of it. There’s a scene where Mack, the main character, spends a morning working with Sarayu, the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, to prune and weed a plot of land which is a mess. At the end of the morning, with lots of work still to be done, Sarayu tells Mack that the mess he’s been working in

is his own soul. It's a rich and evocative image, this idea of working with the Spirit to prune and root out some of the unsavory or even poisonous things which have taken root within us.

The parables about the kingdom of God which Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 13 are certainly about plants, but they are not entirely conclusive about weeds and how we are to handle them. The first parable, about the weeds among the wheat suggests that we may need to tolerate some weeds in order to preserve the wheat, and that only after the wheat is harvested can the weeds be collected and finally burned. If we go after the weeds too aggressively or too early, we'll uproot the wheat, as well. An unknown person said that the way to tell the difference between a weed and a valuable plant is that one is more strongly rooted. Pull on the plant, and if it comes out of the ground easily, it's a valuable plant.

This leads into the second parable, the parable of the mustard seed. Some of you have probably seen actually mustard seeds -- you can even get them in jewelry. Mustard seeds are about the size of coarse ground black pepper, and really, no one in their right mind would sow this stuff in a field. Oh, mustard seed grows, alright, but it is a pernicious weed. It ends roots underground and comes up in unexpected places, and if you give it an inch it will take a mile, and before you know it this plant is a shrub the size of a tree, and there isn't room for anything besides birds in your field.

Jesus explains the parable of the weeds in verse 36, and it's clear that he is not advocating bad behavior -- those weeds are the children of the evil one, and they're going to be thrown into the fire while the righteous will shine like the sun. Fair enough. But I'm still intrigued by the mustard seed, and what we might have to learn about the kingdom of God from this pernicious plant.

For those of you who have not used the word "pernicious" in this century -- or ever in your life -- here is a brief definition: something which is pernicious causes great harm or damage, often in a way that is not easily seen or noticed. Gossip is characterized as pernicious. Physical illness such as cancer can be pernicious. These are things which are difficult to root out. Mustard plant can be a pernicious weed: so why compare it to the kingdom of God?

I believe we as Christians may actually be furthering the kingdom of God when we stubbornly cling to ideas and practices which the world would just as soon eradicate. When we practice service and compassion and shelter for others in ways which are not calculated to be easily seen or noticed, we sow the seeds of God's kingdom which can grow in ways that will be tough to root out. It is always, *always* good deeds and God's will that we want to cultivate, but sometimes we have to go underground to do it. We may even have to begin with a small seed and trust the growth to God. We may start something without being able to control where it goes. Let me give you an example.

This idea began with a conversation with Nigeria Crisis Relief coordinators Carl and Roxane Hill, who reported that a school teacher volunteer had taken T-shirts with her to Nigeria to share with children in make-shift schools and camps for people who had been displaced by violent extremists, the Boko Haram. Creekside's Outreach Team printed shirts for ourselves and other congregations in Northern Indiana, and made enough to send with another group of volunteers. The children liked them, and so did the adults. Carl and Roxane shared these shirts, but mostly they shared the idea with our sisters and brothers in Christ in Nigeria that they were not forgotten and they were not alone, and that there were people whom they had never met and would never meet who were praying that they would be protected, their daughters would be returned, and their children would be able to go to school and have the possibility of settled and productive lives. These shirts were intended to be a symbol of hope and solidarity, and many Brethren gathered in solidarity last year in Greensboro N. Carolina. You will probably recognize some of these people.

I am not suggesting these T-shirts -- or any T-shirt -- changed anyone's life. But I do believe that hope and courage and peacemaking change lives. The shirts were our gift; hope and courage and peacemaking come from God, and it is God's work and the peace of Christ which we celebrate. And tiny seeds can grow in places and grow larger than we expect: Hassan has become a friend and brother in Christ over this past year. Next month he will be moving to Richmond, IN to continue his studies at Bethany Seminary. Because of the connection he made here at Creekside, he will be

considered a Church of the Brethren student and get additional benefits. The greatest benefit to him may be that his wife and son may be able to join him. We pray that Hassan's studies will equip him to return to Nigeria to work at peace and reconciliation, and to help with healing of emotional and spiritual trauma. Our part is a small seed that God can use to provide healing and emotional shelter.

I took the last of the Nigeria T-shirts to Grand Rapids Annual conference at the end of June to be distributed to our Nigerian guests. I marked one especially for Zakaria Bulus, who some of us from Creekside had dinner with at the end of April when he was visiting the States. Because of that connection, the Hills and a woman from Ohio who has also served in Nigeria and handed out shirts, contacted us to support Zakaria as he begins a peace studies degree at Manchester University this fall. Followers of Faith has already committed money to help cover the one-time costs of visas and textbooks. We may be able to provide other assistance later. That's how God works: small acts of kindness and connection can grow into opportunities we never imagined.

I suspect that some of you are thinking, "T-shirts -- that's not my thing. We ought to be doing more than that." And I want you to know that I agree with you. You don't have to wear a bright blue T-shirt to show your support for Nigeria or any other cause. You don't have to wear a shirt to be in prayer or to come to church. (But if you choose to come to church without any shirt at all, there's going to be a fuss, I warn you). And absolutely, we ought to be doing more than giving away T-shirts. I know that many of you, through ministries at Creekside or ministries in other service or mission organizations are already doing more than that -- in your own sneaky and pernicious ways you are making sure that the kingdom of God keeps cropping up. Thank you for those commitments which may be mostly unseen by this congregation.

But I want to recognize and celebrate the fine work Creekside's Outreach Team has done and the opportunities they continue to provide for us. I also want to challenge us as a congregation to do more. Perhaps one way to do more would be to donate more money; there are lots of good causes where we can share financial resources. We need to have honest conversations about our priorities and where

we can combine our gifts to boost their impact. Maybe you can't give any more money, but you could invest some time in service or in relationships. If you have not participated in a Creekside-sponsored activity outside of Sunday worship or fellowship, I challenge you to find a way to do *something* from Creekside which plants seeds beyond the walls of this building. Drop off vegetables at Church Community Services, volunteer at Feed the Children, help knot a comforter, invite a guest to have lunch with you. See if you can do something, or something you haven't already done, by end of this year. I promise that sincere effort, no matter how modest, will make a difference to you and to others. If no one has planned anything you want to do, then come to the January Outreach Team meeting and tell them what you want to do: maybe your idea will be the next seed that continues the growth of the kingdom. It's OK to start small, but if we don't plant anything, God's going to have a lot harder time making that grow.

Brothers and sisters, we may not all be gardeners, but we all have opportunities to plant seeds of service and peacemaking and hope. May God take our small seeds and make them grow into weeds and shrubs and trees for the sake of Christ and the kingdom. And all God's people said, Amen