

“Having Faith”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, June 13, 2021

Mark 4:26-34

Seeds and germination. There are many gardeners watching this worship service, who start their plants from seeds. There are some farmers watching this too who plant thousands of seeds in their fields. It takes a certain discipline to be learned by beginning gardeners – not to fuss over your seeds too much. Should I add a little more water? Do they need a little more light? It’s best to leave them alone, as a seasoned gardener would tell you, and let nature take its course.

Jesus gave several parables to us as a way to help us understand what the Kingdom of God is like, and in Mark 4, gives us this familiar image of seeds that are sown into the ground. Jesus chooses the lowly, underestimated mustard seed as the image for this Kingdom of God, rather than let’s say the seed of a cedar tree, that would grow into the tall famous cedars of the region, the cedars of Lebanon, found in references throughout the Psalms and Old Testament. Jesus tells us that this small seed will grow into a great shrub, with large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

Pliny the Elder was a Roman whose dates are the year 23 to 79 AD. He was a naturalist and a philosopher, and wrote a Natural History. He describes the mustard plant, “It is scarcely possible to get the place free of it ... thus it is uncultivated, ... out of place, deviant, and so on.”¹ So, this ‘out of place, deviant’ mustard plant, vigorous, tenacious and hardy, is the metaphor for this Kingdom of God that is everywhere we look, in our backyards, our sidewalks, our laneways, anywhere there is soil for its roots to find an anchor.

We buy packets of seeds. The packets contain what is on the label. They are all the same kind so there are no surprises when you plant them! The Sower stands and sows the seeds, far and wide. But the difference between us and the Sower is the kind of seed in our hands. If God is the Sower, God reaches into the satchel and pulls out a handful of seed. And instead of the seeds being all the same, each one is different and unique. The Kingdom of God is filled with diversity, not sameness. The Sower sows difference and variety into our world.

A BBC report from May, 2106, says that “Scientists have estimated that there are 390,900 plants known to science. The new tally is part of a report carried out by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. It is its first global assessment of the world’s flora. The study also found that 2,034 new plant species were discovered in 2015.”²

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 175.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-36230858#:~:text=Scientists%20have%20estimated%20that%20there%20are%20390%2C900%20plants,its%20first%20global%20assessment%20of%20the%20world%27s%20flora>. Accessed June 12, 2021.

Lyndon Penner is a gardening expert living in Saskatchewan. He found himself walking the Camino in Spain recently and he was delighted to recognize so many plants along the 800 kilometers of the Camino. But what was more delightful was seeing plants he did not know. He writes, “I also saw a scrambling plant that I am sure is a member of the melon family, but I was never able to determine what it was, even though I am upon it frequently. It’s okay to not know the name of everything; it is good to be reminded that one has more to learn.” He adds, “Naming [plants] is a way of making sense of the world. It is a way of organizing things so that the mind can process them. It is also perhaps a means of control, a way of not being overwhelmed by all the diversity and variety one sees every day.”³

There is immeasurable variety in the plants of this world, and yet we limit what we see to ‘what we know.’ There is immeasurable variety in the people in this world, and yet we limit what we see to ‘what we know.’ As a church, we are so focused on the ‘today’, ‘right now’ of our church. And we can name the plants we recognize as part of Stouffville United Church. We can name the birds that nest in the branches. They are the plants of kindness, plants of community, plants of fellowship, plants of pastoral care, plants of children’s ministry, plants of music ministry, plants of hospitality, plants of laughter and sharing. But these are seeds that we’ve seen sprout and grow and mature in our time. We can measure them, their height and width. We know what birds live in their branches. Is there a possibility that we are so accustomed to the plants we see around us, familiar with their size and shape and colour, that we don’t notice the different plants that may be growing around us?

The Kingdom of God is intent on breaking down the barriers and boundaries we put up to define ‘our space.’ How do we open our view large enough to be able to take in the diversity, vitality and surprise of God’s presence in this world? Where we will see the different birds, in branches that bear a different leaf?

There was a Vigil in Stouffville on Friday night in Memorial Park, to remember the London family murdered a week ago. It was hosted by the Darul Khair Islamic Centre in Stouffville. The Imam was addressing the very large gathering about the hatred he and his community have experienced because they are seen as different. He said, “we dress differently, we eat different food, we have a different way of pronouncing words. But we are just like you.”

This week, at Cawthra Park Secondary School in Mississauga, a video was made of the burning of a Pride Flag and shared on social media. This act of hatred was trying to grind the beautiful plants of the LGBTQ community into the ground.

Last week, the unmarked graves of 215 indigenous children were discovered by ground-penetrating sonar. The Creator sowed those beautiful seeds. In fact the Creator has sowed these Indigenous plants a long, long time ago. They are the oldest plants in Canada.

As the Sower continues to reach the hand into the satchel to sow more seeds into the ground around us and ahead of us, how do we as Stouffville United open our eyes to see all the diversity and beauty in the unique people that are our neighbours?

³ Lyndon Penner, *The Way of the Gardener: Lost in the Weeds along the Camino de Santiago* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2021), 31-32.

The Kingdom of God is about the wonderful diversity of God's love found in the uniqueness of each one of God's creations, whether Muslim, Indigenous, Black, or LGBTQ+. As a commentary observed, "The reign of God will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything."⁴ Like the vigorous mustard plant, like the tenacious love of Jesus, it will get into everything.

As Stouffville United moves forward into a different landscape, my prayers are that you take the time to notice the planting around you. Don't just focus on the plants you recognize.

But be brave and move towards
the plants you don't recognize,
that you've never spent time with,
that you have no idea what their name is.

And with God's leading,
the Kingdom of God
will become a real part
of your corner of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Commentary on Mark 4:26-34 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Accessed June 11, 2021.