

June 16, 2024
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 4:26-34
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The first spring that we lived in the parsonage, which, with the congregation's help, was named, *Sunshine Sanctuary*, Christy Saling, the wife of the pastor before me, reached out to Britton and me with an offer. She wanted to come and show us around our yard, to let us know what she and Pastor Saling had planted while they had lived in the parsonage. She wanted to let us know where beauty hid beneath the ground. She wanted to let us know what wonders we could expect, if the rain fell and the sun shone.

We arrived here over Thanksgiving weekend of 2014. My first day at Emmanuel was December 1, 2014. So, when she made the offer to introduce us to our yard, it was early spring, 2015. How many of you remember the winter of 2015? That awful winter when the Boston area got 10 feet of snow. That winter when I made the trip to and from my back door and the church's back door through what became a tunnel of snow. In the time that we had lived at the parsonage, we had barely seen our yard and simply had taken on faith that something other than mud and dead grass lurked under the feet of snow that had been our predominant experience of Norwood and Massachusetts to that point.

Of course, we said yes to Christy's kind offer to come and give us a garden tour, in a yard where the snow had only just melted. It was more of a potential garden tour, an expectant garden tour, a foretaste of the feast to come garden tour, though. Nothing was blooming yet.

So, one day, when Britton and I would both be home and Christy was available she drove here from her house on the Cape. We fed her lunch and then she walked around the yard with us.

She had equipped herself with tongue depressors and a sharpie and as she walked around the yard, she wrote down the names of the plants, that still slept beneath the earth, on the tongue depressors and push them into the muddy ground. Here's where we could expect beauty to spring up from the earth. One day. Someday.

And as that spring unfolded, we saw the promise of her words appear before us in dazzling color. All of that snow, melting, had given the seeds plenty of water to work with. The sun came out and the buds and sprouts reached for it, bursting forth through the soil into beauty and life.

All of the seeds that she and Pastor Saling had planted during their years at the parsonage became gifts to our family. Their legacy of hard work, hours spent making a yard into a garden, became for us a harvest of color, a harvest of beauty, even a harvest of healing after that traumatizing winter that had left us wondering what we had gotten ourselves into when we moved to Massachusetts.

In the parable that Jesus told in our gospel reading for today, the first parable, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground..." it is the person who scattered the seed who benefited from the harvest. I hope that Pastor Saling and Christy did, indeed, benefit for many years from the seeds that they scattered, but in this parable of kindness, we benefited from the harvest of seeds that we did not sow, that we did not scatter, that we didn't even know were there.

Perhaps that is another parable. The kingdom of God is like people who make their corner of the world, more beautiful, more healing, more joyful, even if they never see, never know who benefits from their work, their kindness, their efforts, their joy in the planting, the tending, the loving.

Let me tell you another parable. The kingdom of God is like boxes of quilts and school bags with notebooks and pens and pencils and rulers and easers and pencils sharpeners, and soap and tooth brushes and nail clippers and combs

wrapped up in towels, ready to be shipped. Those boxes are going, we don't know where, to help, we don't know who, but oh, we pray that they are seeds planted, so that people who are living through situations we can't even, or perhaps don't want to imagine, know that they are not forgotten, not abandoned. So that they know that somewhere, far away, people they'll probably never meet, spent money and time to make sure that they and their children had some of what they needed to stay clean, to stay healthy, and to go to school. In the case of the quilts we hope they know that people, strangers gave of their time and effort and creativity so that they would have something warm and beautiful in their lives. We pray that those boxes, which will be shipped out on Thursday, will yield a harvest of hope, a harvest of comfort, a harvest of healing in many people's lives. A harvest bigger than we can take any credit for. A harvest that grows up and blooms in people's lives. A harvest that is greater than the sum of its parts; that is a miracle of God's abundance that goes beyond our small sharing.

Because that's the other thing that today's gospel reading tells us. It tells us that the kingdom of God grows out of small things. A mustard seed, such a small thing, such a small seed, and yet, out of that small thing grows a huge shrub, a huge bush, in which so many find a home, a resting place, a place of shade for the weary.

For some, when they think of a kingdom, then they think of the kingdom of God, they think of something big and grand and glorious, a tree tall and stately, towering above all. For centuries the church tried to be just that, grand, glorious, above it all, making proclamations from on high, a kingdom of God, modeled after the kingdoms of this world. And yet, that's not what Jesus says that the reign of God looks like. The reign of God, the kingdom of God looks like this small thing, that contrary to appearances, becomes a place where the weary find rest, where the homeless find a home, where the lonely find community, where those blinded by the harsh light of the world find shade.

We, as the people of God, who commit ourselves to the good news of the reign of God drawn near, are not called to be small or hard to find, but to be close to the ground, where the people are. We are called to be growing, and spreading, and offering refuge to all.

In my household, I am not the gardener and neither are the kids. In our household, Britton is the gardener. He has picked up where the Salings left off. Planting new flowers, scattering new seeds, replacing the grass, that stubbornly refused to grow, with wildflowers that flourish, growing vegetables, planting, digging things up, moving things around, building on a foundation of beauty; a legacy of love and hard work.

And I am blessed by that. I benefit from the harvest. Tomatoes, beans, squash, and, because he's from the south, okra, which I have learned to enjoy, and sometimes just the peace and beauty of flowers, of growing things.

But sometimes we are both surprised. Like when he planted a hydrangea plant that we were pretty sure we had let die in its pot, pretty sure that we'd missed the moment, pretty sure that we'd let it go too long, that it had gotten lost in the busyness of our lives. But still he planted it and now there is a tiny hydrangea bush, alive and growing in the ground, fed by sunshine and rain.

When it was in the pot, all we could see was the drooping flowers, the brown and burned looking leaves, the bending stem. It looked like a plant that had given up. Or like a plant that had been given up on. But under all of it, there was life where we thought there wasn't any. Apparently, the roots were still alive. And now, there is a plant, which will be small this summer, but growing, and sometime, some year, it will bring beauty to delight the eyes. It will bring flowers to feed the insects and its leaves will give shade to the rabbits and the chipmunks, and it will be a blessing to us and to all of the small living things that hop and scamper and fly and buzz around our yard. The kingdom of God is like, a hydrangea bush that we thought was dead, but it is alive.

I wonder if Jesus spoke in parables to people, not to confuse them, not to be unclear or hard to understand, but because he wanted them to see the kingdom of God in their own lives, in the small things, in the places where the mysteries of life and death drew near to them. The kingdom of God seen in the unexpected beauty and abundance and goodness and generosity that surrounded them, and that they were blessed to be a part of creating, as they planted and harvested, as they fished and sewed, as they lived their ordinary, seemingly small lives, and yet, somehow were a part of God's great work of loving the world, of bringing hope, of bring life out of death.

Because that's what parables are. They're about things that are more than they seem, things that are more than the sum of their parts, maybe even more than we can see in our lifetimes. They're about small things yielding big harvests. They're about the reign of God come so near that we find symbols, examples of it in our gardens and yards, in our kitchens and workplaces, in boxes ready to ship, in work that surprises us when it turns out to be God's work.

So, in your life, open your eyes. Look around. For the reign of God has come near. What is the kingdom of God like?