

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.14.15
Scripture: Ezekiel
Mark 4:26-34

It was opening night in Lenox. Mid-spring, a Friday night, visitors had come, restaurants had opened, decks had been swept and refurnished after winter's hibernation. Jesse's parents were up from D.C. and we were out to eat, something they like to do. We hadn't managed to find a babysitter, Jesse and I, so we dropped the boys off in town with their bikes where they would gather a whole gang, build jumps, build forts. The late sunset, the warm air: Lenox itself would "babysit" these, our seedlings.

As for actual seedlings, they were busting out too. There we sat, on one restaurant's recently swept and refurnished deck though, still early in the season, the awning hadn't yet been outspread. A recently budded tree was our shelter.

It wasn't very good at it—providing shelter, I mean. Toward the end of the meal, a light breeze blew through, and seedpods—hundreds of them, maybe thousands—showered down. They landed on our plates, in our water glasses.

When the waitress came, she rushed to clear it all away. "Fresh water, clean glasses," she said, embarrassed, as if she herself had spit all over them, us.

For my part, I was just as urgently wanting to keep it all here. Last time something had fallen from the sky it was snow. This was a most welcome thing, these seedpods, showered everywhere. The profligacy, the sluttiness of it, nature wasn't holding back. And for what? Did the tree think the seeds in those pods would grow well on the table? Did the breeze figure those seeds would find good soil for growing in the residue of my risotto? Really, what sort of plan was being played out that so much potential for growth should land on a fork, a tablecloth about to be gathered up and tossed into the laundry service laundry bag, my hair, Jesse's sweater? With this as a method, this tree shouldn't stand a chance.

You see where I'm going.

On Monday, Mary Kate marveled once again about an apple tree. It was a remembered marveling. She had first felt it in her 20s, the marvelous realization that

an apple tree simply grows apples, no matter who picks the fruit and eats it, no matter whether the person deserves an apple or not. The apple tree just grows apples, and then hands them out or later drops them if no one has come along to receive them. Then, the apples on the ground: worms get them, and bugs.

Risking such generosity: how do you risk such generosity? How do you live like an apple tree? Could we? Should we?

You see where I'm going.

Jesus had, just prior to this, told the more familiar parable of the sower of seeds and various sorts of soil—rocky, and thorny, and among too many hungry birds, and finally “good.”

Guess which soil yielded the most growth from those scattered seeds.

We tend to hear that parable and think its implications are about us and what sort of soil we might be, or our hearts might be, for the sake of the gospel that Jesus means to have grow up in the world. Will we be rocky soil, where there's fast growth but also burn out? Or will we be thorny soil where nothing can really grow at all, so cranky, so prickly? Or will we be soil that the birds tend to search for food? (But whose fault would that be? We can't be blamed for what birds will do.) Or will we be “good”?

Of course, the more you articulate what you think a parable is “about” the more you realize these parables get away from you. They're way more puzzling than that. They defy and dodge having simple “morals.” I means, who's to say any of the soil is bad? And, if it's “bad,” then what was the sower doing sowing seeds there in the first place? And what *about* the soil that is “bad” because of birds? Can we be blamed for having hard hearts if we've been bird-pecked all our lives—hectored, bullied, abused, downtrodden? These are all things that make for hard hearts, for “bad” soil. And none of these are the fault of the one with the “thorny” heart, the “rocky” heart.

The more you think on it, the more you realize: wait, what?

For what it's worth, I think we focus on the wrong aspect of the story when we focus on the soil. Really, I think we should think less on the soil and more on the

sower, should perhaps even emulate the sower—this person who simply shed seeds regardless of where they would land. His is not to judge the worthiness of the ground as regards what he has to offer; hers is not judge the quality of where these seeds will land. This person’s task—this person’s calling, vocation perhaps—is simply to spread good seed and let it fall where it will.

This subsequent parable that “Mark” remembers Jesus to have told about someone scattering seed on the ground doesn’t even allow for us to get fixed on judging different sorts of soil, different qualities of receptivity and capacities for fruitfulness. This subsequent parable simply won’t support our tendency to judge (not to mention to *misjudge*) qualities and worthiness. This parable won’t allow us any such misguided footing. We don’t know. We can’t know. Thank God, then, that the proliferation of the kingdom of God in the world relies nearly not at all on our capacity to know, to judge, to decide where to spread the seeds of the gospel, with whom to entrust the love and grace and good news of God.

We’re simply to do these things.

There’s a couple that’s been sitting on a park bench in Lenox—actually a couple of couples. They seem to take turns, work in shifts. Beside them there’s a rack with pamphlets and over the pamphlets a poster that declares, “What the Bible Really Says?”

I don’t trust them—these couple of couples.

They seem like nice people.

At our old house on Housatonic Street there was a robust plant on the side of the yard that marked the boundary of our small house. One spring, Jesse trimmed it a bit, it having gotten unwieldy. (We didn’t want to be *those* people on the street—the ones who let things go a bit, the house paint chipping, the plants and lawn scruffy.)

Not long later, stalks, strange and sturdy, began coming up out of the grass. We would mow the grass, and they’d take their proper place—short and compliant among the soft, mown grass. But then they’d come up again—growing faster than the grass, and more, and further afield in the small yard.

Jesse bought sheers. He trimmed the stalks. (What were they, anyway? And where'd they come from?)

But they'd come up again, and in greater number, further and further afield. And more. He trimmed. They grew—more and more.

Once, Jesse noticed the leaves matched—those on the hyper-growing stalks and those on that shrub keeping the boundary off to the side.

Season after season, the battle grew more intense and seemingly futile. Four years we lived there. During our last summer, Jesse took a trimming to Dr. Leahy's Garden Center on Route 7. He brought it into the shop and asked someone who looked like he would know, "What is this?"

"Don't bring that in here. That's American bamboo. Take that away now."

Good God, Jesse might have thought. He's not used that sort of reception.

It'd be untrue to say that this is the reason we moved. But it wouldn't be untrue to say I don't miss that plant—that plant that we trimmed, and by which we apparently awakened its urge to take over everything.

Now we've got a forest full of bishop's weed behind our house, which sets its sight on my pachysandra every few weeks. I don't mind so much Give me bishop's weed over American bamboo any day.

If there were a Dr. Leahy's Garden Center in 1st century Galilee, someone might have told the person sowing mustard seed to get out of here with that. So, it's the smallest of seeds? Who cares? It's grows into the most invasive of plants, taking over everything. Once let loose, nothing is safe from it. It's got that urge to take over everything.

What's this you say about kingdom of God?

As I work on the book I'm putting together, a collection of sermons that will be published by Wipf and Stock press, I've chosen what sermons will be included and begun to make edits and corrections where needed, to seek permission for use of poems and song lyrics when necessary, and to search out (so to footnote) articles and

books and blogs and podcasts I've relied on as corroborating evidence for whatever point a sermon was suggesting in my writing of it. Footnotes, fair use, public domain: these are all things that I suppose I should have been attending to all along.

I have preaching colleagues who put footnotes in their Sunday morning manuscripts. I have colleagues who always and reliably credit their sources even when no one will see their manuscripts but themselves and any who log onto the church webpage to read them.

I don't. I don't make footnotes or endnotes—which will surprise precisely no one here. But it's not that I'm trying to get away with anything. It's certainly not that I'm pretending to rely on no other minds than my own to make sense of Scripture. I always credit whomever I'm quoting or otherwise using. I just don't do it in the formal manner that the publishing world requires. Intellectual property, while an important notion for the marketplace of ideas and creative developments, has no home in the world of sermons. A sermon strikes me as a creative form that is blessedly off the grid.

Check this out, though. I recently spotted a credit for Abraham Lincoln speaking of “a house divided against itself.” He did speak of this, of course. But the prophet Isaiah did long before him, and in a text that is very much in the public domain.

And check this out. Apparently the estate of Martin Luther King is very protective of his writings. That's why none of his speeches could be used in the film “Selma.” But what of when he so famously spoke of justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream? The prophet Isaiah coined those phrases. So how did they come to be the property of Dr. King's estate?

And check this out: both Popeye and the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's brilliant novel *Invisible Man* proclaim, “I am what I am.” (Ellison's narrator actually has that two ways. As the invisible man, his initials are “I.M.” which the novel never makes plain, only lets play in the shadows.) So, you can see, it's tough to know whom to credit for the phrase, “I am what I am,” unless you decide to go with God who proclaimed that of Godself way back when God first introduced Godself to Moses: “Tell the people I Am sent you to them. YHWH: I Am: I Am that I Am.”

Really, crediting this conversation I find myself in—this now 14-year-long conversation—with God and Jesus and scripture and you and the whole wide world, it’s very hard to trace it all back to the original source. It’s a quite absurd errand to try so to do. It’s sometime even outrageous.

I quoted Joni Mitchell in one sermon, lyrics from her song, “Passion Play.” I sought permission to use the lyrics, which were hardly essential to the sermon, were actually just singing themselves in my head as I wrote. They were groundwork. They were soil out of which the sermon grew. I wanted to honor that. I wanted to give credit to this lyricist whose lyrics have so often moved me and for so long.

I sought permission. I received it. It would cost of \$255 to print those fifteen words.

I cut the lyric from the sermon, which I was sorry to do only because Joni Mitchell does deserve some credit, actually a lot of credit. Her voice, both as a lyricist and as a vocalist, has been a gift to me. Hannah can attest to that. Hannah was a camper where I was on the camp staff and where I made twice-daily use of Joni Mitchell’s music for camp worship—morning watch and evening vespers.

A church camp this was, with twice-daily worship on one of the peaks of this, Pine Mountain, a three-peaked mountain. (That seems right for a mountaintop church camp, wouldn’t you say? Three peaks?) One faced east, where we would gather for morning watch. Another, more panoramic, is where we gathered for evening vespers. And whenever the slightest chance showed itself, I’d feebly play the guitar—Joni Mitchell, who also plays feebly the guitar (though not as feebly as I) and so who tunes it so the six-strings make a perfect chord when strummed open.

I would pretend at being her, aim to be like her; and I’d recognize time and again that I am not her, that I am actually me; and then I began to want that even more. Ironic, then, that at a time when I’m at last able to pay her some tribute, give her some credit, I would need to pay for the right to.

Ironic, indeed. Joni Mitchell has a song that calls into question the “star-maker machinery” that has exalted her and not exalted so many other equally excellent musicians. “Star-maker machinery” is a phrase from her song “Free Man in Paris.” But that’s not the song I’m referring to here. No, I’m referring to the song, “For Free.”

I slept last night in a good hotel. I went shopping today for jewels.
The wind rushed around in the dirty town and the children let out from the schools.

I was standing on a noisy corner, waiting for the walking green.
Across the street he stood and he played real good on his clarinet for free.

Now me I play for fortunes and those velvet curtain calls.
I've got a black limousine and two gentlemen escorting me to the halls.
And I play if you have the money or if you're a friend to me.
But the one-man band by the quick lunch stand, he was playing real good for free.

You know, it must a drag to be able only to play for others if they have the money when what you really admire, find marvelous really, is someone who can play real good for free.

Did you notice Ezekiel's understanding of God as one who'll resort to graft? Taking good growth from one plant and grafting into growth elsewhere, the Lord God clips a sprig from the lofty top and lays it lows for new growth elsewhere else. By graft, the Lord God makes low the high tree, and makes high the low tree.

This Lord God has no sense of rights, no sense of what's appropriate. The profligacy of it...

I know someone who writes liturgies—collections of calls to worship and prayers of invocation. Once when, unannounced, randomly really, she was visiting a congregation for Sunday worship, she noticed one of her prayers featured in the liturgy—though uncredited. The pastor had apparently pulled it from her book and pasted it into the bulletin without giving her credit. She said later to a mutual friend, “It felt like being kicked in the gut.”

I get that. I can see why. But I've always hoped I'd have a different response.

If ever I write a sermon worthy of stealing, I hope you'll steal it, whoever you are—and I hope I'd be okay with that, actually *joyful* at that. This is the gospel, after all. This is the kingdom. The more it grows and spreads, the better off we all are.

Thanks be to God.