

Seeds of Nature

Take a good look at this pine cone, I'll have more to say about it in a little while. The scripture readings today are full of the wonderful and arresting imagery of plants and trees and growth. And no matter what we do or do not understand or agree with in our conversations about God, in one area we can all easily and happily agree. When we talk about the wonders God has done on Earth, the growth and flourishing of plant life is convincing evidence that we are living in the midst of miracles.

When Jesus speaks to his people, and by extension, to us, he takes this into account, and uses image upon image of plants to teach about God. The Kingdom of God is like a seed... The stories he tells are full of these images for two reasons: One is that the Hebrew Scriptures are full of them already and Jesus is a living repository of God's holy Word. We like to say Jesus is the Word of God. Like the most knowledgeable and wise professor you can imagine, Jesus communicates from an utterly complete and instantaneously cross-referenceable database of all there is to know. Makes Google and Wikipedia and Britannica look like the Berenstain Bears. This is why we find snippets of and references to Holy Scripture, especially from the Psalms, throughout the collected sayings of Jesus from the moment he begins to speak in parables, to his dying words on the cross.

The other reason is that images from the realm of Nature work on us even and ever more strongly than is possible for human examples and experiences. When there is a human story, we will always be prone to discuss, second-guess, even argue about what the subject should have done, or whether we ourselves would have behaved differently (ie: better) in the

same circumstances. But when we are presented with imagery from nature, it is much more difficult to deny; it is much easier to accept.

We know that crops improve with sufficient water. So when Psalm 84 says, "As they walk through the bitter valley, they make it a place of springs; the rain will shower them with blessings," we cannot be confused about the meaning: God's love nourishes us, whoever and wherever we are. Whether our taste runs to 'Edelweiss, Edelweiss, every morning you greet me,' or 'Tiptoe through the tulips,' happy indeed is the one whose delight is the law of the Lord, they are like a tree that is planted beside flowing waters, that yields its fruit in due season and whose leaves shall never fade. Not so are the wicked, not so! For they, like winnowed chaff shall be driven away by the wind."

Or today's psalm which tells us: "The just will flourish like the palm tree and grow like a Lebanon cedar. Planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God, still bearing fruit when they are old, still full of sap, still green! What we used to call the three V's, Vim, Vigor and Vitality. Who can argue with that? And even as our bodies start to fail, the spirit of the God's love grows stronger to make up the difference. For we know the greatest miracle of all Creation is God's insistence on being in our midst, in bringing the spiritual power of God's very self into relationship with us here and now in Christ Jesus, so that we will never have to fear death again for long. We are met – well and truly met – halfway between flesh and spirit, like a pilot boat coming out to lead us into harbor, or like the plants that die and rejoin the earth, only to feed the next generation of life.

The saying goes, God will never let you get more than you can

handle. But anyone who has ever suffered true tragedy, the untimely loss of a child or other loved one, the experience of war, famine or disease, the horror of addiction knows full well that that statement is, how can I put this delicately... inaccurate. The truth is there is more to life than a person can handle, and the unhandleable can hit us at any time, when we least expect it, like Candid Camera. The glory and wonder of it all is that, though I might get more than I can handle, God will never let me have more than we can handle: together. And in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God's self and humankind are propelled into permanent and invincible fellowship, permanent we-ship There is nothing we cannot handle.

So Jesus tells these parables today, taking images from nature to depict phenomena of love. "Didja ever wonder why you're so fond of one thing over another, like your favorite ice cream, or soap or country road? I know I have..." There are probably reasons, way back in your childhood, or because of what your parents either did or didn't do. Same goes for the things we fear most; most of them are the products of lies we were told or hurts we felt. But 'didja ever wonder why you're so fond of your kids?' Not really. Mad as heck at them, sure, but the love is just built in, unless something catastrophic or toxic comes along to drive it out. It is the bliss of growth: we know not how or why a seed works the way it does, but we are certainly glad of it.

This is what Jesus is telling us about the Love of God, (the 'Kingdom' is how we translate it these days). There is no explanation, just fact. As Cole Porter wrote, "What is this thing called love; this funny thing called love? Just who can solve its mystery? Why should it make a fool of me?" Jesus is telling us to stop trying to solve the mystery, (stop trying to make flesh out of it is what St. Paul would say) and just become people of

spirit; be made fools for love. Which brings us to the mustard seed parable, one of Jesus' clearest and most inescapable similes, the tiniest grain of love can produce vast results if allowed to grow. See also the butterfly effect, wherein one lepidopteran wingbeat over here in Morro Bay can amplify into a typhoon by the time it gets around to Singapore. Not sure I believe that one. But the idea that every heartbeat of love is felt by the universe and ripples infinitely outward rings true. Back in Missouri, where I come from this idea is expressed as, "It ain't the size of the dog in the fight; it's the size of the fight in the dog."

The mustard seed is Jesus himself, whose one life gave inestimable justice to the world if only we would accept it. "The mustard seed, when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet it puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." He is evoking Ezekiel's great tree: "On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind."

Notice Ezekiel says 'every kind' twice, just in case we didn't hear it the first time: every kind of bird, winged creatures of every kind. Surely that leaves room for every one of us. Our beginnings and our personal power are neither an indication nor a measure of our grace and potential for love. This pine cone is what you would have to plant if you wanted a California Redwood in your yard. Of course you might have to wait a thousand years – and not cut it down -- for it to have its full effect. And that is so hard to understand, I would just rather believe.