

Pentecost 4
Ezekiel 17:22-24 2 Cor.5:6-10, 14-17 Mark 4:26-34

St. Mary the Virgin
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One morning, I noticed that a blackberry vine had mysteriously sprouted in my yard next to the front gate. Supposing that a bird had dropped a blackberry that had taken root, I got ready to pluck it out. My husband seeing it as well, called out, "Let it grow." Remembering how quickly blackberry vines took over the acreage behind my house as a teenager, I eyed that tiny shoot with cynicism. "Let it grow," he repeated. Reluctantly, I did.

The blackberry vine gave rise to more vines, but they surprisingly were well-behaved. Soon came the clusters of white blossoms, and then the bees, and then ripe blackberries that spilled over the gate. People walking by would stop and search for a ripe berry or two, sometimes striking up a conversation with others who also had stopped. Over the years, many have said how they appreciate that patch of blackberries, there for anyone to enjoy.

To me, those blackberry vines—much like the parable of the mustard seed—have taught me some important lessons about God's reign. First, we are called to let go of our assumptions or prejudices, so that new insights can grow. To view things or others from our limited standpoint is to judge them without understanding their worth and place from God's viewpoint.¹ My history with blackberry vines had limited the possibilities that someone else was able to see—their becoming a site of hospitality and community building, not to mention attracting bees that would pollenate other plants in the yard and neighborhood.

Similarly, the people of Jesus' day had assumed that the Kingdom of God (or God's reign) would come about through a great political messianic and cataclysmic event. They would be freed from political occupation and restored to the glory of a bygone era. Jesus, however, goes to great effort to teach that God's reign works differently. When one is looking for the wrong thing, or in the wrong place, one can miss the point—and perhaps the Kingdom itself.

Jesus emphasized that the kingdom of God is not so much a physical place as it is a spiritual condition that emerges out of being in right relationship with God's will.² It is a process that grows within as well as beyond us. It is imminent—here and now—as well as transcendent. God's reign exists apart from us, and yet we can help spread it by opening ourselves to be used for God's purpose. This is a second lesson: We can do very little singlehandedly, but we can actively help let it grow.

¹ Cf. Floyd V. Filson, "Exegesis," "The Second Epistle to the Corinthians," pp.336-37, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. Vol X, pp. 276-425. New York: Abingdon Press, 1953.

² See James Reid, "Exegesis," "The Second Epistle to the Corinthians," p.330, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. Vol X, pp. 276-425. New York: Abingdon Press, 1953.

Growth also takes time, and it may start small. Our part is to show up, and to do what we can, but to remember that we cannot control the rate of growth or the outcome. Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen writes that when people engage in mission work or in social justice, we bring our ideas, skills, and labor to help improve a situation. It is tempting to expect a specific outcome for our efforts. When others don't respond as we might hope, make the change we want, or seem grateful, we can become frustrated. Instead, if we act from that spiritual place within ourselves where our motivation comes from the love of God rather than the desire simply to change others, surprising growth can happen through the relationships we build along the way.³ Jesus' parable of the mustard seed reminds us that God brings forth good fruit in God's time, and we must trust that God is at work in the world.⁴

Last Friday night, a few of us from St. Mary's joined a group from other denominations and faith traditions for an evening Nightwalk around 16th and Mission. For many of us, comfortable in St. Mary's Union Street neighborhood, the Mission on a Friday night can appear intimidating, perhaps a bit dangerous. At several locations we paused to pray and hear the names of those who had died as victims of either gang or police-related violence. The Nightwalk is a walk of faith. For Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, walking by faith meant the journey that would eventually come to see everyone and everything from Christ's point of view.⁵ It's faith that keeps our hearts open and unafraid, and responsive to the human dignity of those we encounter.

We also met with the leaders of Homey, a community organization that helps young people avoid or leave gang life. Homey comes from "home," suggesting a place where one feels accepted and secure. Many in the neighborhood have fled El Salvador and other countries, their lives at-risk. Some youth who come to Homey are struggling with the effects of dislocation; gangs recruit or prey on those who are alienated or isolated. Homey tries to be that place where youth can be accepted for who they are and guided to a better future. Changing the structural conditions that give rise to the violence involves more than they can do, but they can help young people find other paths, including college, so that they are less likely to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus offered a sense of home to those who had been cast out, or rejected, or who simply wanted the type of authentic relationship that God offers. Homey in its own way seeks to offer such a resting place. For some, it's been a second home.

A third lesson about God's reign is that when an outcome bears fruit, it may be different than what we expect. If it is of God, or stems from the spiritual realm, it may surprise us in its inclusivity or diversity. This doesn't mean that "anything goes," but rather that perhaps our vision or imagination had been narrower than God's. In both Ezekiel and the Gospel, the "fruit" is the lush growth where "every kind of bird will live," making their nests (and home) there.

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1978 [1971], see pp.71-89.

⁴ Halford E. Luccock, "The Gospel According to St. Mark: Introduction and Exegesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick. Vol. vii, pp.627-917. New York: Abingdon Press, 1951, p.704.

⁵ Filson, p.339.

Something new grows from what has gone before: a new understanding of inclusivity and relationship with God.

The contrast between small beginnings and the foliage that shelters all suggests both the universality of God's reign and the diversity that God wills and blesses. God's reign--God's love and reconciling purpose—is intended for all.⁶ This is an important reminder at the start of World Refugee Week, where we recognize contributions that refugees have made to our communities and society over the years. There is a legal difference between refugees and asylum seekers, the latter who make their request known as they cross the border, perhaps not having years to wait in their homeland while a refugee request is processed. Both are here because of the need for safety. Both are valued and loved by God.

Many of us have been deeply disturbed by the direction that immigration policy has taken in this country, which has replaced values of hospitality and inclusivity with hostility and inhumanity. The Episcopal Church formally affirms the right to seek asylum, in support of international law which also upholds that right for those fleeing violence or persecution. The latest practice of tearing apart children and their parents at the border is both mean-spirited and abusive. The few attempts to justify this practice biblically have taken scripture out of context and ignored other passages such as our readings and Gospel for today. One of our parishioners wrote the St. Mary's Justice Ministries group yesterday in response to several who have asked, "What can we do?" He wrote: "So, on Father's Day, of all moments, here are things we can do..." The list includes many possible actions, some small yet meaningful, yet all are important. He then adds, "But, for now just find something that works for you and do it. For God's sake—and I mean **God's sake**—let's do something!"⁷

Even if your faith--or mine--is no larger than a mustard seed, letting it grow also means actively nurturing it. Sometimes what appears as an irritation to the serenity of our lives, if acted upon, can transform our relationships with God and with one another, and ultimately help increase the reign of God. What step in faith do *you* need to take toward the flourishing of God's reign?

⁶ Eugene S. Wehrli, *Exploring the Parables*. Boston: United Church Press, 1963, pp.49-50.

⁷ Quoted with permission.