

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Third Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL & ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

Introduction. According to the Church calendar, we are in the season after Pentecost, commonly known as Ordinary Time. The term “ordinary” refers to the counting of ordinal numbers from Pentecost Sunday. For example, we are in the Third Sunday after Pentecost. I guess we had to call it something. Ordinary Time continues until Advent. We notice the change in temporal seasons through the change of the colour of the trees. As we gather to worship in church, the change in liturgical colours cues us to the change in church season. For Ordinary Time, the liturgical colour is green.

Common Theme. Figurative language tools like metaphors, allegory, and parables are in heavy use throughout today's readings. Most of the readings depict the image of something small, seemingly inconspicuous, growing under the nurture of God to become something large, bold, and obvious, something that draws attention to the Lord and acts as his witness. The readings describe an interesting relationship whereby the Lord works in us, and in turn that work in us bears fruit for the Lord. We participate, but God gets all the glory.

Ezekiel 17:22-24. In this passage of Ezekiel, the Lord himself uses the metaphor of a cedar tree to promise he will intervene in human affairs. He describes a small branch being planted by the Lord, and though small, it will grow, bear fruit, provide shade and become strong. This new majestic tree will receive homage and adoration from other trees and, more importantly, will witness for the Lord. Who is this small tender shoot of the cedar? Perhaps the cedar is a metaphor for the Messiah or the people of God, or maybe even both. Both testify to the truth of God. The Lord in his sovereignty acts personally, carefully, and deliberately. He chooses the branch from the tree. He chooses where to plant it on a prominent mountain, and he provides the means to make that which was dry flourish with green new life. Something that was small and perhaps insignificant has grown and flourished in God's hands and has borne witness to the Lord. This metaphor can be applied to the Messiah, to Israel, and the Church, and to each of us, too. Each of us may be small (one in eight billion), but we are chosen, and we are empowered by the Spirit as witnesses for the Living God.

Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14. Psalm 92 is unique amongst the Psalms in that it is the only psalm titled “a Song for the Sabbath.” In antiquity, worship was conducted in the temple every day of the week. Perhaps this psalm became part of the special Sabbath liturgy. Psalm 92 is a praise to God for his special characteristics of loving-kindness and faithfulness. It begins with a simple yet profound opening line, “It is good to give thanks to the Lord.” Verse 4 reminds us that we are glad and joyful because of what the Lord has done. His deeds and acts of kindness cause us to be joyful and respond in praise. Truly, while not impossible, it would be hard for us to worship the Lord had he not actually “done” anything. The psalm uses the metaphor of trees, planted in the House of the Lord, continuing to bear fruit into old age. The trees and the fruit, metaphors for the people of God, who in verse 11 are called the “righteous,” are nourished by courts of the Lord. How, exactly, is not described, but perhaps by the very presence of God

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or, in our case, the presence of the Spirit of God. The result of God's care is that we bear witness to the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord. Bearing witness means that the testimony is seen by others. And here is the connection: God performs acts of kindness and the work of his hands (v 4), which we see. This results in both our praise and our flourishing under his care. This obvious flourishing then bears witness through us and is seen by others, revealing God to the world and honouring and glorifying him.

2 Corinthians 5:6-17. Paul in this epistle to the Corinthians does not make use of a nature metaphor as in our other readings. However, the similar thought of God's action, his abiding care and presence bearing fruit in our lives, is indeed present. The presence of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon all flesh at Pentecost, indwells us and gives us confidence. Paul says we are always confident. Confidence in what, we might ask? Confidence that God is preparing us for eternity with him. This confidence in a future resurrection energizes us for ministry in the here and now. Walking by faith and not by sight is one of the hardest, yet profoundly powerful, principles of the Kingdom. We believe and act and, in some cases, suffer for God, whom we have not seen. This does not mean we do not see the acts of the Lord working in our lives nor his handiwork in creation. Jewish literature often employs the term “walk” to speak of someone’s conduct or behaviour. This is not to be confused with works-righteousness. No one is advocating earning one’s salvation, however, walking by faith is still walking. Paul does not admonish us to sit by faith. Our confidence, our walk of faith including our actions bear witness that we are indeed new creations. Though we have not seen the Lord, we know the fear of the Lord, and this prompts us to “try to persuade others.” We have confidence in the future and the courage to witness today.

Mark 4:26-34. Our Gospel portion includes two parables with the parable of the growing seed occurring only here in Mark. Parables themselves are a unique literary device in Jewish teaching. They only occur in the Gospels and in rabbinic literature. They are not found in the Jewish diaspora nor in the writings of Paul. Parables appear to be a very localized form of teaching, and all 436 known parables are in Hebrew. While Jesus may have spoken Aramaic as daily vernacular, it appears he taught parables in Hebrew. These parables portray a slow and almost hidden dynamic to the Kingdom of Heaven. Many of us want to see the explosive dramatic expansion in our churches, but rarely are we content with measured growth. Many Jewish people at the time of Jesus also looked for the powerful, dramatic, divine intervention of God’s Kingdom. Many did not anticipate the small, tiny, almost inconspicuous messianic community of the Jesus movement to be God’s plan. The parable of the growing seed also reveals the cooperative aspect of salvation. The farmer plants the seed, and God grows the seed without the farmer necessarily knowing how it all works. The Greek word is *αὐτομάτη* (*automatos*). The seed grows automatically and bears fruit without the farmer's effort, yet the farmer was the one who planted the seed in the first place. We all fit aptly into this picture. We have been given the Holy Spirit and a commission from the Messiah to go into all the world and to witness for him. We are to plant the seeds of the Kingdom, but we don’t see how it all works. We know that it does work, for we can see the fruit of the Good News. What began as a few hundred Jews in the Jesus movement has now encompassed the globe with more than two billion adherents. This is the glory of the Father’s work in us.

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