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6/17/18--University Presbyterian Church
Ezekiel 17:22-24, **Mark 4:26-34**

INVASIVE SPECIES

Sometimes the most effective form of communication is not always the most direct form of communication. Sometimes stories or allegories are better at communicating a message in ways that invite deeper meaning or deeper contemplation. Jesus employed this method when he told parables. These complex little stories were not told for explanation but rather for exploration. These parables encouraged people to engage their imaginations and prodded folks into entirely new ways of perceiving what is holy and sacred. Such is the case with this short little parable Jesus told about the mustard plant.

Jesus is trying to communicate something important about the kingdom of God. And so he tells this parable: the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which is a very small and tiny seed. But when it grows, it becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

Now, from our perspective all these centuries later, this story seems pretty straight forward. Jesus seems to be telling us that from small beginnings can come forth big results, and that the kingdom of heaven is like that. But such an interpretation is not really accurate because you and I sitting here today are missing an important part of the story. We are missing the joke that is contained inside this little story because we don't understand the literary reference Jesus is making.

Imagine that two ordinary people from Buffalo were to receive an invitation to attend a state dinner at the White House. And as these two individuals stepped through the grand columns at the entrance and walked into the magnificence of the White House, and observed the

gleaming table with its fine crystal and china dish ware, and noticed the famous guests milling about, one of those Buffalonians turned to the other and said, "Toto, I don't think we are in Kansas anymore," the meaning behind those words would be instantly understood. You and I would understand that reference from the movie *The Wizard of Oz* and that it was used to highlight the difference between humble origins and the present situation of extraordinary splendor. That movie reference has meaning to us in our culture. But this allusion would not be understood by a person from a small Guatemalan village who had never seen the movie.

We don't get the full meaning of Jesus' story about the mustard plant because we don't immediately understand the literary allusion he has made in the parable. But everyone listening to his story when he told it, all those people would have immediately understood the reference he was making and would have immediately understood the joke Jesus was telling.

The reference Jesus makes in this parable is to another piece of scripture. Jesus references the passage from Ezekiel that we also read today. This passage from Ezekiel arises from the time when the Jewish people had been conquered by the Babylonian army and then forced to live in exile from their homeland. It was a time of great despair for these people. They felt defeated and abandoned and hopeless. But the prophet Ezekiel offers them encouraging words about what God would do for them in the future. Ezekiel tells them how God would make them great again one day and he uses the illustration of a mighty cedar tree as an allegory for themselves. Cedar trees are majestic looking trees, tall, stately, strong, impressive. Ezekiel tells the people how God will plant a piece of a cedar tree on a high mountain, "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."

Did you hear the similarities in this passage from Ezekiel to the one Jesus just told in his parable? When Jesus told his parable about the mustard plant growing to be a great shrub and being a place for the birds of the air to come and make nest in its branches, his audience would have immediately understood the reference to the Ezekiel passage about the majestic cedar tree. And they would have understood the joke Jesus was telling. In fact, it's likely that Jesus was grinning when he told this parable because what he was saying was so absurd. Mustard plants, you see, were considered weeds. Mustard plants were invasive species that would take over your garden if you weren't vigilant. Like kudzu in the southern states or dandelions here up north, mustard plants were not something you would ever intentionally plant in your garden. They were nuisances to be gotten rid of. And unlike the cedar tree, there was nothing noble or majestic about the mustard plant. Mustard plants were low, bushy weeds.

Now you see, this little parable has just gotten a lot more complex. Remember, Jesus tells this story to teach us about the kingdom of God. And what he tells us is that the kingdom of God is not like a noble, strong cedar tree--as much as we might *want* it to be, but rather like an invasive bushy weed that nobody thinks very highly of or even wants around.

Now what are we to make of such a message? Who wants weeds? Who will give any respect to weeds? What we want are cedar trees! We want God's kingdom to come in grand, noble, noticeable ways--to make us great again, to make our nation great again, to make our churches great again. Make us cedar trees, we pray to God when we are filled with despair, when we have been overlooked by the boss, when society devalues us, when hardship arises. We want respect and power and strength.

But Jesus tells us that God's kingdom looks more like a weed. And not just any weed, an *invasive* weed--those weeds that just keep coming back no matter what you do. There is a weed

in my front flower bed that I cannot conquer. It's some kind of vine and no matter what I do, I can get rid of it. I pull it up where I can, but I know that its roots run wide under the ground and that it will appear here and there and there. The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus tells us. It is like an invasive weed, that cannot be conquered, that will keep growing and growing no matter what.

People mistake size for strength--like the cedar tree. But strength isn't only found in size but also in tenacity, like the invasive weed that won't go away, that just keeps growing and expanding.

You know, the people Ezekiel spoke to were in a dark time because of their exile. But the people Jesus told his parable to about the mustard plant were also in a very dark time of despair due to the oppression they experienced by their Roman occupiers. Jesus' audience knew what it felt like to wake up every day with the boot of Rome firmly planted on their necks. They passed by roadside crucifixions designed to terrorize the people into submission. They experienced the burden of the heavy taxation Rome demanded, which ensured they remained in grinding poverty. They knew the insecurity of a life where Rome could kill, enslave, arrest them or their family at any time. Jesus' audience also longed for a day when they would be great again, strong again, when they could defeat their enemies.

But instead of telling them they would become like cedars, Jesus tells them that God's kingdom to which they were called to be a part of, was like an invasive weed. In the face of all that was evil and wrong and unjust in their lives, Jesus calls them to undermine injustice with acts of mercy, to sabotage hatred with love, to destabilize greed with generosity, to undercut selfishness with sacrifice and service. The kingdom of God is an invasive species in this broken

world and you and I are its agents. We are part of God's spreading, growing, expanding presence of the kingdom.

Now on the surface, who would notice what we do as anything special? After all, who notices a visit to the hospital? Who recognizes the time spent bagging groceries for a food pantry? Who sees anything terribly extraordinary in the check written to a charity? Who pays attention to a letter written to a member of Congress? Who will record your efforts to forgive your brother-in-law? Standing up for immigrant children is not seen as glamorous. Exercising patience with your demanding neighbor does not make the headlines. Being generous with our building, or our money, or our time, is hardly seen as extraordinary acts of bravery or courage. But Jesus invites us to consider that these seemingly small, ordinary acts are part of the invasive expansion of the kingdom of God. They are part of God's invasive, tenacious presence. There is great evil out there in our world. There is much brokenness and pain in our lives, in our families, in our communities. And it would seem that cruelty and pain are too strong to tackle. But then we are reminded of the kingdom of God, the weed that won't give up. You and I are God's invasive species, spreading compassion, kindness, love, justice, and forgiveness into this world. And we are called to do it each day, every day, in the ordinary moments of our lives. Our love, our forgiveness, our kindness, our generosity--these are ways we invade the world with God's kingdom.

And what we also come to understand is that this same tenacious, invasive presence is all around us when we experience our own dark times. On the surface, in the face of our pain, our hardship, our darkness, in our shame, it may seem as if the kingdom of God cannot be found. But even when we cannot see it, it is there, underneath the surface, with a root system that grows wide. And there is no predicting just where it will emerge.