

“Evergreen”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
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*3<sup>rd</sup> Sun. after Pentecost*

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Mark 4:26-34

*[Jesus said,]*

*“The kingdom of God is as if [someone] should scatter seed upon the ground,  
and should sleep and rise night and day,  
and the seed should sprout and grow, [they know] not how.*

*Mark 4:26-27[RSV]*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to do the work of preparing each other for your work in this world,  
and may we be as ready to help each other  
as a good gardener is ready to care for the garden.

Amen

Our Community Garden has sprouted and is growing.

We started with 20 and now have 40 plots, 4'x12' each.

It is expected that half of the original gardeners will leave by autumn –  
whether it turned out to be too much work to keep up with the weeding  
or for whatever the reason.

Even so, they will be replaced by those on the waiting list,  
and that is as natural as the cycles of the growing season.

Our Community Gardeners had a potluck dinner last week  
to share some of the bounty, have fellowship, and discuss plans.

At one point, someone asked me if I had a story about “gardens”,  
I said I did, though I didn't tell it then.

The story that immediately comes to mind is one I have told here from time to time,  
a fanciful story by Jean Giono about a man who planted trees  
in a desolate region of southwestern France.

As he methodically planted 50 acorns a day for years –  
and later the seeds of other trees, he re-forested a wasteland.

The roots of those forests held water to the earth allowing streams to flow again  
followed with the natural growth of grasses and wildflowers.

People then began to settle there and re-establish villages and towns  
that had long been abandoned.

This story is a fiction, but there are such people in real life  
who are examples themselves of Jean Giono's French ‘Johnny Appleseed’.

Willard, p.2

An African woman named Wangari Maathai started the Green Belt Movement while serving in the National Council of Women of Kenya.

Her purpose was to help Kenyan women who

‘had to walk further and further to collect firewood for fuel’.

She saw how ‘planting trees [not only] could provide these women with firewood, [but] fruit, fodder for livestock, and fencing for their land,

... [as well as] stop soil erosion and keep streams flowing’.

[From Wangari Maathai’s Forward to [The Man Who Planted Trees](#) by Jean Giono]

She also linked her organization’s work for the environment with a holistic approach that sought true democracy and peace – especially promoting women’s rights.

Her efforts for social change, however, put her and her organization in direct conflict with the ruling regime of Kenya.

Wangari was beaten and arrested many times,

nevertheless her work was recognized and provoked change.

She received the Nobel Prize in 2004 for her work with the Green Belt Movement while serving as a regional representative in Kenya’s parliament

before her untimely death to cancer in 2013.

<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wangari\\_Maathai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wangari_Maathai)

The Green Belt Movement has continued to be active in Kenya and has planted more than 51 million trees.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_Belt\\_Movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Belt_Movement)

Closer to home is the work of Andy Lipkis, a Californian

who as a teenager at summer camp in the piney woods outside of Los Angeles, learned that those forests were dying from air pollution.

At age 18,

he became motivated to start an environmental advocacy group, TreePeople, and initially he reached out to other youth to organize tree-planting projects.

A news article in the LA Times about TreePeople helped it get noticed and to get support.

TreePeople continues to educate communities and promote the planned planting of what is now more than 2 million trees

which help sustain urban environments as well as preserve forestlands.

They are actively involved these days in helping California through its drought crisis.

<https://www.treepeople.org/andy>

Jesus used agricultural parables to teach about the nature of God’s Kingdom as something that was living and growing, with room for everyone.

His image of the tiny mustard seed that grows to be the largest tree in a garden where all the birds take shelter is companion to Ezekiel’s parable:

*It will grow into a mighty cedar.*

*Birds of every kind will nest in it and find shelter in the shade of its boughs.*

*[Ezekiel 17:23<sup>b</sup>]*

Willard, p.3

The other parable tells about a sower who plants a seed and faithfully watches its progress day to day.

Though he doesn't know the biology of what's going on, still watches for growth to alert the reaper for the time when the crop is ready for harvest.

The same is true about how God's Kingdom can become a social reality – can become a Beloved Community on Earth as it is in Heaven.

It is a mystery that is dependent upon God – and the activity of the Holy Spirit that comes and goes where it will.

This implies that – though we may not always be in control in life or know what God is up to, we can still trust God by watching and waiting with hope.

Why has it been so hard for that Beloved Community to happen?

Why is it so hard for people of goodwill to work together?

Why don't people and groups realize they can survive and thrive better by working for each other's mutual benefit?

Why do criminal organizations or predatory financial systems have any success while people of goodwill continue to flounder in disunity?

Though it is always up to God and God's timing, still there is a role for us to play and a job for us to do.

The elements of true community – the Beloved Community of God's Kingdom, has always been there for us, like tools and seeds on hand to build a garden.

Just as Jesus promised the righteous ones in Matthew 25, telling them...

*'inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'...*

so I believe the resources we need for Beloved Community right now come from "seeds" sown since the beginning of the world.

We have the resources to help make God's Kingdom happen and there is a role for us to play and work for us to do...

The parable that precedes these two parables also has an agricultural theme, familiar to us as the Parable of the Sower – but is really about people's hearts.

Jesus tells about a sower who cast seeds far and wide in the hope that they might grow despite the conditions round about.

He explains to the disciples that the 'seed' of the parable is the Word of God – the Word of truth, and that it will fail to take root in the hearts of people who are streetwise, or shallow in their faith, or distracted by cares, unless their hearts are prepared.

Jesus does not mention the one who plows the field to tear up the pavement, dig up rocks and pull out the weeds, to get a good yield – in this case, of lives that are saved.

This is the work disciples must do – working with people to open their hearts like working the ground for planting.

Willard, p.4

Then the Holy Spirit can work through those people who have opened their hearts though neither they nor the disciples nor we understand how.

We help each other prepare the ground of hearts to continually reap a harvest of goodwill that can come with being in a congregation that

approaches that Beloved Community of Christ we aspire to be.

By the fellowship we create through worship and mission and fundraising and maintaining our shared sacred space, we allow the Holy Spirit

to sow the love of God and create the fruits of Beloved Community.

Any organization can be corrupted –

and sadly, even churches, can falter that way;

However, if we do a good job tending the weeds and watering the plants, encouraging each other and challenging each other,

then we can tell the difference between good and bad produce...

As it is written in Galatians 5:19-24

*[19] Now the works of the flesh are plain:*

*fornication [as in sexual abuse], impurity, licentiousness,*

*[20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit [as in “political party spirit”],*

*[21] envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.*

*I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.*

*[22] But the fruit of the Spirit is*

*love [as in intimacy], joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*

*[23] gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.*

*[24] And those who belong to Christ Jesus*

*have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

The Apostle Paul said,

‘Crucified the flesh’, but we have to remember we are also resurrected in the Spirit of that Beloved Community that is possible for a church when a congregation is actively working together.

Let me close with this story was adapted from a Cherokee myth...

*When the plants and trees were first created they were given a task*

*[by the Creator]:*

*[“You are] to stay awake for seven days and seven nights.[“]*

*The first day and night all of the plants and trees stayed wide awake and the second night as well,*

*but by the third night many of the smaller plants and trees were falling fast asleep.*

*Who would be able to stay awake*

*and keep watch for seven days and seven nights?*

Willard, p.5

*But on the seventh night and the dawning of the eighth day  
there stood the Cedar, the Pine, the Spruce, the Fir, the Hemlock,  
the Holly and the Ivy.*

*"You have endured," [the Creator] said,*

*"And you shall be given a gift. You shall be forever green."*

<http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Discount-tix-available-to-IN-THE-GROVES-through-June-10th.html?soid=1103945267901&aid=nczoWg3fWW4>

What does it mean?

I really don't know – though I think the story was told to explain why  
piney trees are green all the time.

Yet part of the story is like that first parable today

that part of what is expected of us by our Creator –

that the first job we are given to do, is simply to be faithful and wait,  
and tend the garden we have been given to watch.

Amen

*Our lesson today is Ezekiel 17:22-24 from the Common English Bible Translation.  
It tells of a vision of national prosperity and wholeness  
despite dramatic reversals, and through God's grace...*

[22] The Lord God proclaims:

I myself will take one of the top branches from the tall cedar.

I will pluck a tender shoot from its crown,

and I myself will plant it on a very high and lofty mountain.

[23] On Israel's mountainous highlands I will plant it,

and it will send out branches and bear fruit.

It will grow into a mighty cedar.

Birds of every kind will nest in it and find shelter in the shade of its boughs.

[24] Then all the trees in the countryside will know

that I, the Lord, bring down the tall tree and raise up the lowly tree,

and make the green tree wither and the dry tree bloom.

I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do it.

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words...*

Mark 4:26-34

[26] And [Jesus] said,

“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground,

[27] and should sleep and rise night and day,

and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how.

[28] The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear,

then the full grain in the ear.

[29] But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle,

because the harvest has come.”

[30] And he said,

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God,

or what parable shall we use for it?

[31] It is like a grain of mustard seed, which,

when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;

[32] yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs,

and puts forth large branches,

so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

[33] With many such parables he spoke the word to them,

as they were able to hear it;

[34] he did not speak to them without a parable,

but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

