

“Perfect Rows”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, July 26, 2020

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

I am part of the team that plants our church’s two garden plots in the town’s allotment gardens. Produce from our gardens is taken to the local Food Bank. We plant our gardens during the first warm week in late May. It’s always fun to gather and open the seed packets and plan where the rows will go. Weeks later, the rows which were just traced in the soil are now verdant lines of greenery, with rows of lettuce, radishes, and onions. The beans and tomatoes are now enormous thickets of leaves.

When one looks at one’s garden, there are a number of things going on in the mind of the vegetable gardener. We scan our work, admiring the perfect rows, noticing the spacing of the plants, and mull over our expectations of yield. And all is bliss until our eye falls upon something that shouldn’t be there – a weed. And we quickly reach to pull it out and throw it away.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

When Jesus said this to the people around him, it was common knowledge that the mustard seed wasn’t admired for its growth into a shrub. But rather shunned, probably the way dandelions have a bad name today. If one saw a mustard plant amongst one’s perfect rows, it was to be yanked quickly. As a commentary noted about the mustard seed, “the plant it produces is a trash tree – or more accurately a trash bush, no matter how tall it gets. Mustards are the kudzu of their day.”¹ Kudzu is the highly invasive vine that I often see running rampant through the countryside, covering trees and shrubs with its massive web of leaves.

The mustard plant, like the kudzu, is invasive. It seems it can take over the perfect rows of the planted field and garden. It disrupts the conformity. It compromises the yield. It brings unwanted chaos to the orderly plantings. It shouldn’t be there. Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to the mustard seed. If I look at the values of the mustard seed as I’ve just described, then it tells me what to expect from the Kingdom of Heaven. For me, the Kingdom of Heaven is interchangeable with the word ‘God.’ So, if the mustard plant is invasive, then God is invasive. If the mustard plant upsets the conformity, then God will upset the conformity. If the mustard plant adds chaos to order, then the expectation is that God is going to mess up my perfect rows.

A commentary offers insight in the ways in which a church experiences ‘order’ to its rows: “In the church, we want to be able to define what fits within it and what does not ... We have Scripture. We have creeds. We have liturgy. We have tradition ... nice neat rows of carefully tended doctrine and practice.”² Certainly, Covid-19 has done a number on our image of

¹ Feasting on the Word Commentary, Pastoral Perspective, 286.

² Feasting on the Word Commentary, Homiletical Perspective, 287.

perfect rows of pews, which now sit empty. Or when we return to our sanctuaries in the future, the order or layout of our ‘rows’ will look a lot different.

The Kingdom of Heaven, like the mustard seed, is identified by its invasive, unpredictable and unexpected inbreaking into our perfect rows of ‘order’, our perfect rows of ‘control’, our perfect rows of ‘expectations’. What do we do when God messes up our perfect rows?

Jesus says that the mustard tree grows into this beautiful tree, that offers shelter to the birds of the air who will come and ‘make nests in its branches.’ The mustard plant represents shelter, a place of refuge. The mustard plant offers life, a place to flourish. So rather than thinking of the mustard plant as a weed, something to be plucked out and thrown away, I’m beginning to see the presence of the mustard plant as a sign of life trying to flourish in a world where it’s not welcome.

There was an article in the Toronto Star on July 20th about one Toronto teacher’s ‘challenge of doing equity work.’³ Louisa Julius is a new teacher, teaching Grade 8. She identifies as a South Asian person. The school principal was concerned about a number of issues in her teaching. One of them was having on her desk numerous copies of the 1988 classic article on White Privilege by Peggy McIntosh, titled, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”. Julius had redacted the article to what applied to her Grade 8 class and it was used in a class discussion about the pictures that surfaced of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in blackface. The principal singled this out as a problem.

Is this an example of a mustard plant trying to grow amongst the controlled rows of educational policy? Is this a mustard plant bringing a little chaos into the neatly weeded garden rows of education?

In 2006, Florence Naziel decided on her response to the upcoming March 30th Symposium on the missing and murdered indigenous women who had disappeared along the Highway of Tears in B.C. She decided she would “walk the highway to raise awareness about the missing and murdered women and girls.”⁴ She left Prince Rupert, B.C. on March 11, 2006. “Walkers made the 725-kilometre journey along the highway to Prince George”⁵, arriving just before the beginning of the Highway of Tears Symposium. It wouldn’t be until June 2019 that the Report from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, ‘Reclaiming Power and Place’, would give 231 Recommendations. The report would state that “many Indigenous people have grown up normalized to violence, while Canadian society shows an appalling apathy to addressing the issue. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls finds that this amounts to genocide.”⁶

³ Shree Paradkar, “A TDSB teacher’s struggle with equity”, Toronto Star, 20 Jul 2020, article. Accessed July 20, 2020.

⁴ Jessica McDiarmid, *High of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* Highway of Tears, (Anchor Canada, 2020), 174.

⁵ McDiarmid, *Highway of Tears*, 182.

⁶ https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Executive_Summary.pdf. Accessed July 21, 2020.

Canada has 231 Recommendations from this inquiry, alongside the 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. So, there are 325 recommendations coming to Canadians regarding injustice, and naming cultural genocide amongst the Indigenous peoples in Canada. Is that equivalent to 325 mustard plants growing among the neat and organized rows of Canadian governance structures? Are we, as Canadians, going to weed out these mustard plants so that our perfect rows aren't messed up?

I recognize in the voices of the oppressed in the shape and the heart of the mustard plant – which offers shelter so that life may flourish, as the birds of the air make their nests in the branches. This helps me to see how the Kingdom of heaven works – as it breaks into our ordered world to reorder our world. Maybe there is something more to the lowly weed than I knew.

The presence of God is like the invasive, unpredictable arrival of the weed amongst the perfect rows of the garden. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a pesky weed in our best-planned gardens. Maybe I will think twice before I reach down to yank it out.

Thanks be to God. Amen.