

Eleventh Sunday of the Year (B)

June 17, 2018

**Ezekiel 17:22-24
2 Corinthians 5:6-10
Mark 4:26-34**

We are at the beginning of the growing season. Gardens are being planted and before long we will enjoy good things the garden. I am always amazed how some folks are truly gifted in working with the soil and how some of us have to work hard to produce our own tomatoes, peppers, and onions. My grandfather was a farmer and he raised cattle. He helped my grandmother put in the garden each spring but he was far more interested in his fruit trees. A story recently reminded me of my grandfather.

A traveler in Maine came upon an apple orchard and noticed the trees were so laden with fruit that their branches had to be propped up to keep them off the ground. When asked about it, the owner of the orchard told the visitor to look at the trunks of the trees, near the bottom. When he did, he saw that the trees had been wounded with a deep gash. The owner said, "When the tree tends to run to wood and leaves and not to fruit, we wound it, and almost always, no one knows why, this is the result: It turns its energies to fruit!"

As I remember, my grandfather did not take such drastic action to wound or gash his apple trees. What he did, when a tree was not bearing fruit as he expected, was to take some pretty large rusty nails ... four or five, maybe more. He would drive them into the trunk of the tree. "Sometimes," he would say, "you have to remind the tree that its work is to bear fruit."

The owner of the orchard and my grandfather, and so many others, have learned through experience how to coax the tree to bear fruit. Exactly how it happens remains a mystery. None-the-less, this speaks of the delicate balance between the earth, growing things, and we human people, the delicate balance between God and we human people. This is what the sacred word is inviting us to ponder today.

The opening lesson from the prophet Ezekiel is a fable that expresses a ray of hope at a dark and tragic moment. The people of Israel had been taken away from their homeland and were in exile in Babylon. Through their time of captivity, many had been unfaithful to the Lord and the covenant. Here Ezekiel speaks of God taking a tender shoot from the upper most branches of the cedar and planting it on his mountain where it grows into a great cedar. Under this magnificent tree and within its branches, every living creature and every kind of bird will nest and find a home. In this peaceful setting we are invited to come to know God ... and to ponder that God's very nature is to create and to re-create, again and again.

The lesson or allegory goes on to say, all the trees ... the other nations ... recognize the grandeur of this one and yet they neither convert nor become the subjects of the mighty and beautiful Israel. Israel's splendor is to serve as a sign and witness, and in no way dominance. Israel and the nations both understand what God says, "I, the Lord, bring low the high tree, lift high the lowly tree, wither up the green tree, and make the withered tree bloom." This proclaims the God of Israel as the God of life and the Lord of history. Even as God favors Israel, God specifies her role is simply to be a sign to others.

This first lesson points us toward the Lord Jesus in the gospel lesson. There is a clear connection I think, between the tender shoot and the two parables of green and growing things in Mark's

passage. The Lord is pointing out that there is a delicate balance between our very selves and the Lord God, the mystery of growth that very much involves the farmer, and yet, is beyond the farmer. The seed once planted has its own potential for growth, independent of the farmer. The mystery of the growth belongs to the seed and the soil, the seed gives way to the nourishing earth, to unhurried and gradual growth. What is required of the farmer is patience, confidence, and trust.

I would say that these lessons are calling us to reflect upon our present ecological crisis. Once we acknowledge God as the source of all life we recognize the wonder of nature, we ponder what God is asking of us. Ezekiel's image of the tree, which houses the birds and shades other creatures, reminds us that God places a great responsibility on each one of us. Our calling, our vocation is to work with the good earth, to bear fruit, and to be a shelter for others. Allowing God to work through us will enable us to prosper and to leave the good earth for the generations that will follow.

Once we celebrate Eucharist, we will go out and begin this new week. May we walk humbly upon the earth and strive for that delicate balance working with and for the Lord!