

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B Readings and Commentary
Celebration Summary by Glenn CJ Byer, MA SLD

Whether we are old or young or somewhere in-between, the readings this week are God talking to us. The first reading speaks of the very top, the youngest part of the cedar tree as the source for planting; the psalm speaks of trees bearing fruit even in their old age, and Paul speaks clearly about our longing to be with God no matter where we are on life's journey. And so when we hear the parable of the mustard seed, we can hear once more that powerful or not, grown up, grown old, or a child, we are integral parts of the plan of God for the universe.

It would sound like pride on our part, but the truth is that every mustard seed, every tree, every star is also part of that plan. Our respect for the universe, our desire to explore it from the cosmic to the sub-atomic level, our desire to describe it in music or art or drama, and our concern for the ongoing health of the planet we call home, all of this can be a way of praising God, a way of cooperating in grace for the good of all creation. It is a way of hearing the word of God and acting on it.

So how should we prepare ourselves to hear this word? For those who serve in some aspect of the liturgy, it is very important that we treat people of all ages as full members of the assembly. This does not mean talking baby talk as we proclaim the readings or greet people or if a clergy member as we preach. But when we prepare comments or intercessions, we need to take into account all God's children, from those who are just born and those go to school all the way to those who are retired.

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First Reading Ezekiel 17:22-24

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel

Thus says the Lord GOD:

I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar,
from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot,
and plant it on a high and lofty mountain;
on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it.
It shall put forth branches and bear fruit,

and become a majestic cedar.
Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it,
every winged thing in the shade of its boughs.
And all the trees of the field shall know
that I, the LORD,
bring low the high tree,
lift high the lowly tree,
wither up the green tree,
and make the withered tree bloom.
As I, the LORD, have spoken, so will I do.

The word of the Lord

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Commentary by Glenn CJ Byer, MA SLD

Even in Israel it would be a bit odd to find a cedar tree on a lofty mountaintop: the climate just wouldn't permit it. So the reference is intentional — when God takes the youngest part of the cedar tree and puts it somewhere that one does not find cedars, it is doubly clear that something new is happening. God is breaking rules in our favor. It is an interesting paradox. God made the world perfect, with no cedars on mountaintops, but God is willing to let even these rules bend if it means that the people of God will come to their senses. The reference to fruit and the birds of every kind coming to nest there serves the same purpose. Cedars don't bear fruit and no tree would bear the presence of birds of every kind, even if limited to the kinds known to the people of Israel. So what is going on? God is promising to Israel a new life, impossible as it may seem. God is going the extra mile to make little insignificant conquered-in-a-day Israel the envy of nations everywhere, with a richness of resources and security from all its neighbors. All the other nations, the other trees that are big and powerful, all of these will be laid low. What God does for Israel, God also does for us. If we are open to hear the word, God will plant us and give us all the resources we need to meet the challenges of any new day. And as for those of us who feel blessed, this should not make us nervous, as if our days of joy are numbered. Blessings from God should make us generous and thankful.

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Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians

Brothers and sisters:

We are always courageous,
although we know that while we are at home in the body
we are away from the Lord,
for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Yet we are courageous,
and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord.

Therefore, we aspire to please him,
whether we are at home or away.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
so that each may receive recompense,
according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.

The word of the Lord

2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Summary by Virginia Smith

Real estate ads that refer to houses as 'fixer uppers' always seem amusing. If there is a house on Planet Earth that is not a 'fixer upper', it would be the eighth wonder of the modern world. No matter how new a residence or how luxurious, there's always something in the owner's mind that's wanting...that remains to be done. In time, there is an entire list of such items, and the day will never dawn when the final item is crossed off that list. Why? Because every earthly abode is temporal. Like our bodies, our homes begin to deteriorate eventually. A onetime popular song, "This Old House", described the process very well.

Still, everything in us yearns to be home. Paul calms our fears assuring us that we will be...that we are, indeed, immortal, but not here. When winter winds find their way around the edges of our doors and summer rains trace a path through our shingles, we can take comfort in the certainty that a more glorious dwelling awaits us, one with no structural problems, provided rent free forever.

A note of condolence once read, "What we experience when someone we love dies is homesickness." How true! It's the same 'all gone'

feeling we had the first time we were away from home and unable to return. Those who move through that filmy curtain we persist in calling death are now at home. We aren't...yet. But we yearn to be. Paul advises soothingly: Patience, people. The best is yet to come.

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Gospel Mark 4:26-34

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

Jesus said to the crowds:

"This is how it is with the kingdom of God;
it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land
and would sleep and rise night and day
and through it all the seed would sprout and grow,
he knows not how.

Of its own accord the land yields fruit,
first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.
And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once,
for the harvest has come."

He said,

"To what shall we compare the kingdom of God,
or what parable can we use for it?

It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground,
is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth.

But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants
and puts forth large branches,
so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade."

With many such parables

he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it.

Without parables he did not speak to them,

but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

The Gospel of the Lord

Summary by Glenn CJ Byer, MA SLD

There are two parables in today's Gospel, so let's take them each in turn.

The first deals with growth. Farmers, gardeners, anyone who keeps

plants know this parable to be true. Seeding and growing plants is something that requires our attention, but the actual growing is beyond our power. Growing up on the farm we planted an extensive garden, and on planting day my sister had a tradition. Once the last seed was covered, she would stare at the garden very seriously and say in a loud voice, "GROW!" We all laughed, because even though we worked to ensure that our plants bore the most beautiful flowers or the best produce, or even just the greenest green on our lawn, the actual growing is beyond our control. It happens without our permission.

The second parable of the mustard seed comes at growth from another direction. Here, Jesus is reminding us that the end is not predicted by the start. If it is not an inborn trait, it certainly is a common flaw that people are quick to judge. We want to peek ahead, read the last chapter and see how the story ends. But the parable of the mustard seed shows us that this is not possible. Everyone can grow in surprising ways, everyone can change.

Taken together, these parables should both give us hope and take away our excuses. It is God who makes all things grow, sometimes in new and surprising ways, so our current problems should never be an excuse for embracing the future and all of its possibilities. Scarlett O'Hara was partly right—tomorrow is another day—but so is today! Each day we can make things better, we can accept God's call and grow. Even if what we think is God's way forward seems blocked, we can trust that God has a hundred ways. Today it is only for us to seek and to find—to discern. God will do the growing.

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