

“It’s Not About Us!”

Parables are everywhere. Most of you know that Lois and I have a fishpond in our back yard. I have surprised myself at how much I enjoy taking care of it, including caring for the various plants that are part of it. One of my favorite plants last year is called a Pickerel. Its stems grow at least three feet tall, and then the arrowhead-shaped leaves bend downward, like this [demonstrate with arm]. It’s very exotic looking, and even has a beautiful, purplish flower pod.

When I asked the lady at the fishpond store in Wichita what I needed to do with my Pickerel over the winter months, she advised me that once it had gone completely dormant (which one can tell by it looking completely “dead” ☺), I should submerge it at the bottom of the pond, to keep it from freezing, and that when spring came it would come back to life. Good as new! So I did that. But when spring came a few months ago, nothing happened with my dormant/dead Pickerel. I took it to the fishpond store and showed it to the lady. She poked at it for a bit, said she didn’t think it was dead, that it just needed warmer temperatures. She told me to pull it out of the pond for a while and to water it every day, so it can warm up while remaining moist. I did that. Nothing happened. I tried rearranging the soil in the pot, and adding some new soil, in case any new shoots were struggling to break through. I eventually put it back in last year’s spot in a shallower part of the pond, thinking that surely the warming temperatures would cause it to grow. It’s still sitting there, a heavy, ceramic pot, filled with fresh dirt and the apparently dead remains of last year’s exotic Pickerel plant. I’m still waiting for it to come back to life, to start growing again, especially given our recent summer temperatures. Nothing’s happening.

Does this seem like it might be a parable? A parable of our church, perhaps?

At the time the prophet Ezekiel wrote this morning’s words, the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. They were dormant. Or were they dead? At the very least, they had lost their homeland. They had lost their vitality. They had lost their sense of worth and purpose. Their self-esteem was at a low point. Compared to the nations around them, like Ammon and Moab, they were nothing.

And so Ezekiel, as always listening carefully for what God wanted him to say, wrote these words to the people. Words of comfort, and hope, and promise.

There could be no question that they were God’s words, and that Ezekiel was merely their messenger. **“Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.”** The message is clear, first of all, that God is in charge. And second, that they, Israel, were not dead. God will bring them back. God’s words speak poetically and beautifully of new, abundant life. Like a noble cedar tree that flourishes once again, giving shade to “winged creatures of every kind” [**“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”**]. God even promises a complete reversal of fortune, that even as Israel’s “tree” would no longer be dry, the trees of its neighboring countries, those countries scornful of Israel, would dry up and be brought low. [**I bring low the high tree, I make high**

the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.] “I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it,” God promises. You are not dead. But don’t misunderstand. My purpose is that **“All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.”** It is not about you! God is implying. It is about me. The Lord GOD.

Are we at First Mennonite Church in exile? Are we dried up, dying? How is our self-esteem right now? Especially in comparison to the other churches around us?

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells a lot of parables. Including parables of God’s coming Kingdom. Which is another way of saying, Parables of God’s promise. Parables of new growth and even rebirth.

In today’s first parable [**“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how**], the one who sows the seed has no control over whether the seed actually sprouts and grows. The sower doesn’t really even understand how it sprouts and grows. It just does. That part is in God’s hands. It’s not in ours. It’s not about us! [**The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.**”] Only when the wheat is ripe does the sower have his own role to play. But even then, it’s not about us!

The second parable is also about God’s kingdom, God’s promises. [**With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a 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.**”] It is like a tiny seed, so small as to appear almost insignificant, like Israel in exile, like all those having a lowly self-esteem, like us, perhaps. But when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.

Listen to what one commentator says about **this passage**: **“First, parables are not simple little stories** used by Jesus so that everyone... would understand his teaching. On the contrary, not everyone did understand.... **Second, parables are a form of literature** that, like poetry, demand a great deal from the listener... **Third, those who do hear are an inner circle**, not of superior intelligence but of personal attachment to Jesus. They are ‘with Jesus.’ **Fourth, Jesus was himself a parable of God.** Jesus as the presence of God, as the Son of God, was not obviously so to everyone... And **finally**, because **the subject matter is the mystery of the kingdom**, the listener should expect snatches of insight and partial discoveries rather than mastery of the subject matter...

The truth is, the commentator continues, growth of the seed “takes place totally apart from human effort... and from human understanding... The seed carries its own future in its bosom, and efforts to coerce and force growth are futile...”

“The parable of the mustard seed is clearly a word of encouragement. Let those concerned, frustrated, or even depressed by small beginnings, by the apparent insignificance of the enterprise to which life and resources are committed, take heart. Let the vision of the end (‘the greatest of all shrubs’) inspire and inform today’s effort, knowing all the while that the end as well as the beginning are God’s doing and not our own.”

I know some of you are concerned, frustrated, or even depressed right now. I am too sometimes. It's been a hard year—and not just for us, but for many churches. We find ourselves asking some hard questions. What if they don't come back? What kind of church do we want to be, post-pandemic? What kind of church does God want us to be? Is it possible that it's actually not about us?

And so, at the end of each day, we have to trust that we are a seed, a plant, that is firmly and completely in God's hands. To borrow another parable, we are like clay, to be lovingly pounded and shaped and molded and used for God's purposes and promises. It's not about us.

As of this morning (and I checked!), last year's beautiful, exotic pickerel plant in my fishpond still has not started growing. It's just sitting there, looking pretty dead. But in the meantime, another of my pond plants, a water iris, is blooming for the first time ever, a beautiful rich purple. And even as I keep waiting for the old pickerel to grow, I went again to the fishpond store and bought and brought home a new one—or rather, four new ones, which I put together in one pot. two are supposed to have blue blossoms, and two which will have red. The blue flowers have already begun blossoming. I invite you all to come see them, and my irises, and my goldfish, and my entire pond. I consider it a parable of God's kingdom.

Let's stand and sing together.