
Kudzu Kingdom

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 6, Year B

They did not understand about the kudzu. Our new neighbors, who had just relocated from Boston, trading the rarified bookstores and wine cellars of Cambridge for the “all you can eat” fish camps and dive bars of south Mississippi—our new neighbors appeared at our front door one sweltering August evening to pay the sort of social call people still made in small towns back then. The husband, beaming broadly, handed my mother the vase in which she had taken them an arrangement of her heirloom roses the week before. In it now were the Black-eyed Susans and Queen Anne’s Lace of late summer and . . . a few artfully placed pieces of kudzu. The wife explained, “We keep seeing this pretty ivy everywhere down here!”

My mother, who did battle daily to maintain the only authentic English cottage garden ever known to have survived the swampy, sandy soiled terrain of the Mississippi coastal plain, quickly cut her off. “Dorothy,” she said in the same thinly controlled voice I remembered from the time I decided to see what would happen if I stuck a grape up my nose—*Dorothy, that is not ivy. That is kudzu. It’s a nuisance plant, and it’ll take over absolutely everything. It won’t just climb up the steps to your porch, it will come right into your house. You’ll wake up one morning, and there will be vines wrapped around your neck. Now . . . did you find this in your yard or did you cut it off a telephone pole?*

Today’s gospel reading includes two of Jesus’ “agrarian parables,” that is, two of the stories Jesus tells using images like vines and seeds and weeds; fields and bushes and trees and other “growing” things—images Jesus uses to describe the many weird yet wonderful ways God works in our world, the fantastic, yet frequently flummoxing, breaking in of God’s Kingdom of love, justice, and peace in the midst of all the hatred, oppression, and despair. Someone scatters seed, Jesus tells us in this morning’s reading from Mark—someone scatters seed, then simply goes about his business, and somehow that seed grows, though no one understands quite how. Jesus then describes a tiny mustard seed that, without a single dose of Miracle Grow, morphs into this ginormous shrub, a shrub so big it becomes a shelter in which all the birds can build their nests.

Well, what the heck does any of this have to do with the Kingdom of God? One hint may lie in the fact that the particular species of plant Jesus is talking about here is known for being a nuisance plant. Like kudzu, it thrives in environments where few other things survive. Dead, abandoned places. Hapless, hopeless places. Around dive bars and dirt floored fish camps. In soil that hasn’t yielded a harvest for as long as anyone can remember. The mustard plant is invasive; it tends to take over. All those plots of land that were being saved for other purposes, perfectly reasonable purposes like yielding a bumper crop of some highly desirable, highly profitable vegetation—all those plots of land that were going to be devoted to other things are now going to be subject to the movement of this wild mustard bush and the mysterious ways in which it extends its branches, letting stray birds and lord knows what other sorts of creatures come in and find a home.

It doesn’t take a big stretch of the imagination to see why, if your new neighbors from North Nazareth happened to bring you a branch or two of this mustard bush as filler for a flower arrangement, you’d be inclined to throw it straight into the trash. You’d recognize it for the threat that it was, for the sheer annoyance that it could become. And so you’d toss it. Which would be a shame. Which would be a real shame. Because in doing so, you’d be tossing out not only the potential for trouble and chaos, for financial ruin and even strangulation, you’d be tossing out the potential for all sorts of joy and wonder and redemption, too. You’d be throwing away the opportunity for new life!

All of which pretty much rings true with what I’ve been privileged to witness of God’s work in this world and how

God's Kingdom still manages to break in and create ravishing beauty in the midst of the ugliness of life. For example:

You have an overwhelming sense one morning that in spite of how hard it is even to get out of bed and go to work these days, you need some time in church and so you come to Sunday School. During the 45 minutes you spend there wondering if you should have just stayed home catching up on Netflix or scrolling on your phone—during the 45 minutes you spend there, you find others who are struggling just as you are. They are kind and they share coffee and donuts with you and they pray with you. It's nothing major, just the sorts of things church people do, but, at the end, you go home feeling like you make it through the rest of the day and probably the next day and then the next one after that.

Or you find suddenly that you can't just walk past the man hunched over on the bench in the park surrounded by a gazillion plastic bags filled with dirty clothes and empty soda cans. You find you can't just walk past him anymore like he's not there. And so you stop for a second and say hello. The next time you see him, that is not enough and so you engage in a little conversation and learn something about how he has come to be sitting on that bench. You are late for work that day and late for dinner with your spouse the very next. Why? Because you've gotten caught up researching why it is that more and more people in our country lack housing and other basic necessities. Next thing you know, you're part of a group that meets regularly for breakfast and morning prayer with homeless men and women downtown at Church of the Common Ground.

Or you hear about a parish in the Netherlands that saved a whole family of refugees from deportation after discovering Dutch law prohibiting government agents from arresting people during worship services. The family was already living at the church, so when the threatening letters started to arrive, the pastor simply began a prayer vigil. The vigil spilled over from the first day into the first night and then into the second day and the second night. Parishioners and also clergy from other churches started to arrive, and they helped sing and pray and read scripture. It was a nuisance at times, it threatened to take over their lives at times, but they kept it up for months, 24/7, until the refugees were no longer at risk.

These are just a few of the ways, this morning's gospel suggests—these are just a few of the ways that the Kingdom of God takes root and grows in us and in our world. In small ways. Unexpected ways. Surreptitious ways. Frustrating and inconvenient ways. Crazy, incomprehensible ways. In all these ways and more, God's Kingdom shows up. God's Kingdom shows up. It happens. And, if I had to guess, more than half of us are here this morning precisely because of this—because we ourselves have seen it happen or because, in spite of our all our doubt and confusion, we still live in hope that we will see it happen.

Now. Back to those new neighbors from Boston. Some 10 years or so after their move down to Mississippi, I was home from college for the summer. My mother was recovering from minor surgery. We were sitting on the porch one sultry night, when we saw Dorothy and her husband emerge out of the darkness of the side yard carrying a tray. They came in, sat down, and we passed the tray around. For a few moments there was complete silence, as we all enjoyed what everyone agreed were some of the best brownies we had ever put in our mouths. "What's the secret ingredient?" my mother innocently asked. To which Dorothy replied without a touch of irony: "Kudzu! It's kudzu!" Which sounded like grace and tasted like the Kingdom. Amen.