

“Bordering on Love”

The last few weeks have been a feast of agricultural parables. We had the farmer who was sowing seeds everywhere not just in the tilled soil, but on the path, in stony ground and in the briars. No sensible farmer would waste his seed on unfertile ground, but God sows the seeds of love everywhere, on those ready to receive it and on those that might not seem ready. God’s love is abundant and never runs out. If it sprouts even for only a moment on unfertile ground it is better than if that ground had never seen love. In the kingdom of heaven love is everywhere and available to all even the most hardhearted.

Last week we heard about a farmer who would not weed his field. The sensible farmer would never let the weeds grow and strangle the wheat. He would get them out of there as soon as possible to give the wheat a chance to grow and flourish. But this farmer seems to have two concerns. One is that the wheat is so precious he does not one to lose even one stalk. The other is that the weeds, by associating with the wheat might be transformed. In the kingdom of heaven weeds can become wheat.

This week’s reading starts off with the kingdom of heaven being compared to a mustard seed. The mustard plant in the Palestine is not cultivated it is a weed. The seeds are almost microscopic and the plant grows big and wild; big enough for birds to nest in.

When we plant our gardens or our fields we plant systematically. We do not scatter as the wheat farmer does, the farmer plants her soybeans, tomatoes or strawberries in rows so she can run the tiller through without digging up all of the plants. It makes it easier to harvest them mechanically or by hand. Go for a drive around here and you see grapes grown on trellises. Growing your crops in an orderly manner keeps things neat and all aspects more efficient.

But what about those microscopic mustard seeds? They could have found their way into your good seed. When you plant you do not know that you are sowing a weed. It just happens and then next thing you know you have a ten-foot-tall mustard plant in the middle of the soybeans or strawberries. Perhaps Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is like an invasive plant that grows willy-nilly in places unexpected.

We try so hard to circumscribe our world. Look around you and you see borders everywhere. We are surrounded by borders—fences, curbs, sidewalks, the chair setup. There are also borders that are not physical such as laws, creeds, rules, race, language, gender, and ethnicity.

The church over the millennia has for good or ill set up barriers to membership and participation. These include beliefs, baptism, creeds, tithing, race, sexual orientation, gender, and language. Beliefs and baptism, for example, were intended as ways of orienting people into the faith. The church wanted to make sure people understood and could accept the tenets of what they were joining. Over time, it seems that some of the beliefs got codified into creeds. You must believe these things or you

cannot be one of us. Those who believed wrongly about the faith got labeled as heretics and were banished from membership and sometimes killed because the church believed their beliefs were so dangerous.

In its desire to keep everything in neat rows and easy to manage, the church became fixated on borders. Yet Jesus was not fixated on borders. He accepts and loves the outsider and the marginalized. He accepts those who live on the fringes—the tax collector, sex worker, leper, the mentally ill and foreigner—some would even become part of his inner circle.

So the Kingdom of Heaven instead of being like a planned garden, like my square foot garden just over the fence, is more like the compost pile that has sprouted a huge proliferating vine of unknown origin and bearing, an as yet to be determined, vegetable. The Kingdom of Heaven comes up in unexpected places and unwanted circumstances. The Kingdom of Heaven is wild and lovely like that mustard plant that grows and flourishes in the middle of the strawberry patch or a row of beans. If we catch it early enough we can pull it up. That is certainly what the world often does. But if it grows unobserved it flourishes and the birds of the air nest and the beasts of the field shelter in its shade.

The kingdom of Heaven can grow in the most unlikely places. Instead of cathedrals it grows amidst ramshackle housing the way Windy Hill did. Instead of among the well-educated and supposedly normal it grows among those who struggle with what society calls normal as it does at A Place To Be. Instead of among the healthy it grows among the dying as at Blue Ridge Hospice, or among the battered and afraid as it does at Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter. Instead of in a lovely little church it grows in a parking lot among those who are so hungry for God they brave the heat and humidity to worship.

The Kingdom of Heaven may be wild and unruly and not fit into any creed, theology, or philosophy that people can think up. That is how wonderful and glorious the Kingdom of Heaven is.

Rather than create borders let's knock them down. Let's really live the slogan "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." When we do I expect we will find more wonders than we could imagine. We will find love and salvation for each of us and for many more who are waiting outside the doors hungry to enter. Let's beckon them in to mess up our orderly ways as we come together in wonder, love and praise.