

Sermon for Sunday, June 13, 2021 - "Seeing Differently"

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Before we were married, my husband Matt moved to Western North Dakota for a year of pastoral internship. Many of our seminary classmates were relieved that he was the one who got sent to a town of 26 people. I much preferred my internship site outside of Chicago. And when I went to visit Matt that year, I spent a lot of time making it clear that I would not be moving there after we graduated from seminary.

But Matt absolutely loved the people and the landscape of Western North Dakota. When he first drove into Divide County, he was struck by the beauty of it all. Not only were there actual amber waves of grain, there were also these gorgeous yellow flowers everywhere. Thankfully Matt held his tongue before commenting on the beauty of these flowers. Within just a few days he heard a farmer complaining about the wild mustard everywhere. It turns out that those yellow flowers were a very invasive weed that the farmers spent a great deal of time and money trying to remove. Matt was glad he hadn't shown his ignorance and he still secretly enjoyed the beauty of those bright yellow flowers everywhere.

When Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed, I wonder if people in his day thought he was ignorant and even a little ridiculous. Shouldn't the kingdom of God be compared to the lofty cedar tree mentioned in our first reading? Shouldn't it be described as something grand and glorious rather than an invasive weed? In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus shows us that the Kingdom of God is not what we expect. It is surprising, unexpected and even downright subversive to the ways of this world. The Kingdom of God spreads and grows and seeps in every which way and cannot be removed no matter how hard this world tries.

In this parable, Jesus also asks us to see differently - to see that a weed the world would uproot can provide shelter for the birds, that it can help us to better understand God's kingdom. Much of the Christian life involves learning to see differently. We come to see that the cross, a symbol of death and torture, is actually the tree of life that leads to the healing of the nations.

We discover that Jesus' gifts of bread and wine are the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We practice seeing one another as the body of Christ on earth and seeing all people as God's beloved children. We learn to see differently. I think this is part of what Paul is getting at when he says, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view ... for in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

Faith helps to see God's new creation all around us and in one another. Over this past challenging year, I have been so grateful for people who practice seeing differently. Last fall, a Good Shepherd member reached out to me to express frustration that the church building was still closed. We had a good conversation about why that was, but I knew he was still feeling troubled. A few weeks later that member sent me an email. He wrote, "Over the past week I have seen you on four different

Zoom meetings and online worship. I recognize that so much is still happening even though we are not meeting for in-person worship. I see God working in our congregation. I want to say that I see you and how hard you're working. I want to say thank you."

This member was practicing seeing differently. Rather than fixating on his worries for the congregation and his own pain about not being able to gather, he chose to look for signs of God at work in unexpected and surprising ways. Rather than focusing on the faults of his pastor, he chose to regard me and treat me as a sibling in Christ. That email was a tremendous blessing to me. It is a gift to be regarded with love and gratitude. It helped me to be kinder with myself and others.

It is so easy to focus on everything that is wrong and troubling and upsetting. We are captive to sin and so prone to judgment, critique and stereotypes. Yet God gazes upon us all with such extravagant love and declares again and again, you are my beloved child, I delight in you.

God sees the beauty and the good within us and works to bring it to fruition. God's loving gaze is what allows us to see God's new creation in the world, in one another. It is what empowers us to practice love and gratitude rather than judgement and critique.

Beloved ones, today God says to you: "I see you. I see you and all the beauty within you. I see you and I love you. You are my beloved child. You are a new creation. See that new creation at work all around you."

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.