

“Sprigs and Sprouts”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

June 13, 2021 – Third Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34

Here we are on this beautiful day, gathering under these glorious trees, these two beautiful magnolia trees and this amazing maple tree, which I think is some kind of Crimson Norway Maple. (Holding up tiny maple sapling) I have a little tiny version of it here. This was growing in the bushes right over there. And it's a little bit smaller than this mighty maple under which you are seated. (Holding up a tiny oak sapling) And I also found growing in the bushes this, which could have grown into a mighty oak tree if I had left it alone. Sorry, little guy. It is amazing how these grand, glorious trees grow into their majestic form after being but little seeds and sprouts and sprigs. We know that these magnolias were planted in 1974, which is a while ago, in memory of Karen's mother. And look how they've grown over the years. They surely didn't look like that in 1974, did they? They were probably little things then; now they're big, beautiful things.

In today's stories, we're learning about things that were plants that started small and grew up to be big. In our reading from the book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible, we read of how God takes a sprig from a cedar tree and promises to plant it in Israel. This was written at a time where the people of Israel had been taken into the land of Babylon, were no longer living in their own land, and doubted that they would ever continue to exist at all as a people. God told them that they would indeed. Though they feel like they're small and insignificant, God would take their little sprig of a nation, plant it in Israel, and grow it into a mighty tree, a mighty cedar tree. (The cedar trees that grow in Israel, Cedars of Lebanon, can grow to be 120 feet tall and eight feet wide. That's a pretty big tree, isn't it?) So it's a beautiful story about how God can take something that seems so tiny and grow it into something that's great. That's what God does, especially with those who feel hopeless and insignificant. God says, even though you feel small, I will make something great of your life.

Now, Jesus echoed that story in his parable of how mustard seeds get planted and grew up into becoming mighty bushes. The mustard plants where Jesus lived

were Black Mustard bushes. They grow eight feet in one year. The seeds that they came from are tiny. Many of you receive those seeds earlier this morning. You can see how small they are. They are just tiny, little things, but they can grow into becoming great bushes. And these mustard bushes grow like crazy and take over whole gardens! So Jesus is making the point that God's goodness in our lives like that tiny little seed: It can start small but grow and expand into being something great.

So God is growing goodness within us, and God is growing something great because of the work that we do in the world. That's what we celebrate this morning. God is taking so many of us that seem small and doing great things in the world through us.

Think of our young ones on this Children's Sunday. We've got lots of little ones here today. They're an important part of our church. They've started as tiny, little things, but we see how they're sprouting and growing bigger. Today, some of them are leading us in worship. We hope that our children continue on as part of our church, get their third grade Bibles, and go through confirmation, like our high schoolers who are here today, who are confirming their faith and joining us as full members. We hope that they continue to grow as fellow members and become leaders among us, like a some of our confirmands who are going to be joining committees and boards.

So this is great that we have young people who started out as tiny, little sprigs, have grown in this congregation, and are now among us as leaders, providing shade and comfort for others. This is a wonderful, wonderful thing that we celebrate today!

It's also really wonderful to have a couple of baptisms here in the next few weeks for people who are children of those who started out as tiny, little sprigs in this church. We're going to be celebrating the baptisms of the children of Kayla and Kevin, who grew up here, and also the great granddaughter of Doris. It's wonderful to see the cycle of God taking the tiny little seeds and growing them up to the point where they bring more life to our church family.

Another thing that we celebrate this day is that we have life growing and flourishing among us in many different varieties. One of the beautiful aspects of the readings that we heard earlier was that both the great cedar tree and the

great mustard bush they provide shade and a places for birds to hang out and raise their young ones, a place where they can make their own home. The resting and roosting birds mentioned in these scriptures are called “birds of every kind.”

Something we celebrate here is that we are a place where we can gather under the shade of God's grace and raise our young ones as a flock of birds of every kind. We’ve got some odd birds and we’ve got some strange birds; we’ve got some big birds and we’ve got some little birds. We have birds of every kind here, and all of these birds are welcome here. This is so beautiful!

This is part of what makes us unique and special. In an unwelcoming world, we say all are welcome, no matter who you are, whom you love, or where you are on life's journey. You are welcome here, and you always will be!

This day, I hope this message of welcoming love can grow in our hearts, so that we can grow together all the more as a community of faith. And I hope that we can fly out from our gatherings and bring this message of welcoming love to Stoneham and to all the communities where we live. May our message grow. May it flourish. May it become the way of all people, of all of our Christian sisters and brothers, of all people in this land, that as a people, we may we become more loving and more welcoming. Amen.