

“What God’s Growing” (12Feb17)
Matt5:21-37; 1Cor3:1-9; Deut30:15-20

As Acacia and I prepare to go visit my cousin in North Carolina tomorrow, I’m thinking about kudzu, recalling my first time down south seeing this invasive weed that completely enshrouded other plants and stretched up over telephone poles, becoming the only green thing in sight.

With that, I’m also remembering a visit when this cousin lived in California and we stopped to see redwoods and giant sequoias along the way. So I’ve been picturing the way two different plants stretch and grow, and their part of how they fit with (or don’t fit) the natural environment and our world.

These two images have been on my mind with the declaration in 1st Corinthians that “you are God’s field.” Since you’re God’s field, it has me pondering what God is cultivating and what sort of farmer your God is, what growth you might be experiencing, the fruits you should be bearing. I’m suspecting the vision of a towering sequoia could be representative of your place in God’s field, more so than the overwhelming incursion of kudzu.

That answer isn’t a foregone conclusion, though, because the Bible is (as usual) ambiguous on this. Where we might presume that God favors the straightness and strength and beauty of ancient sequoias, and as much as that’s our direction today, that’s not always so; when Jesus describes the heaven-ish empire like a mustard seed, that’s exactly the weedy invasive image, directly saying that your work as a Christian is to get into the mix of so-called good order and foul it up, to put a wrench in the gears (to switch from agricultural to mechanical imagery). In that case, that a small shrub wouldn’t seem mighty, but spreads and spreads until it overcomes. So we might need to rethink the kudzu this summer when we get to Matthew 13.

But today God *is* cultivating you to be more sequoia-ish, which may fit the more traditional version of God as farmer. It parallels images of God pruning grapes, cutting off branches so the vine will be more fruitful (John 15), or of Jesus as the fertilizer salesman who wants to spread more manure around the tree and give it a chance to produce figs (LuKe 13). So you are God’s field, and God the farmer is striving to cultivate you to bring forth what you’re intended to produce.

And that can frame this portion of the Sermon on the Mount for us. It’s a helpful frame, because otherwise this section can sound mostly legalistic and stern without much good news. Again, it’s worth asking what God intends for you and for the relationships you share, for your place in community and this world. And we’d have to expect that God intends maximal good, the best possible outcomes, and not simply the lowest common denominator, robust growth and not a pale spindly seedling. That’s the point of this reading.

As a first example, a discussion I was part of a week ago was pondering what it takes to “count” as a Christian. It was originally in terms of the Apostles’ Creed, on how many standard beliefs you could pass up and still qualify, on how few of those doctrines you’d have to claim still to be defined as Christian —if you needed to believe in the virgin birth or not, if you had to subscribe to a resurrected Jesus walking out of the tomb on the third day. Now, I love the value of theological debates and wonderings. But that’s different from a question asking, “how little can I get by with still to count?” I don’t believe Jesus would find much interest in categories of creedal assertions as gate-keepers to the faith, but even more particularly he wouldn’t try to ask how to minimize connections influencing faith and God.

Another example, moving from thought to action: I used to have sermon notes in my Confirmation curriculum. I figured the value

included paying attention during worship and noticing the setting and thinking about how it integrates with the rest of life, but it most simply boiled down to the importance of joining regularly into these essential central gatherings of worship, this place where our faith is most deliberately cultivated. Yet without fail, if 20 sermon notes were required, I'd instantly be asked how far you could fall short and still manage to be confirmed.

We've somehow got this tendency to ask about the bare minimum, to wonder about how many Sundays you can miss church or how much you really should give or how nice you need to be and how many nasty thoughts you can get away with. Yet I suspect for Jesus this is asking the question exactly backward, that we shouldn't be trying to get by by doing less and less as Christians.

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us not to slide by as having fulfilled the Commandment just because you haven't directly murdered anybody, a mark all of us can quite easily meet this week. He presses us more to recognize the damage and destruction caused by hatred and to stop those similar forms of small death. Luther pursues this direction, too, as we're seeing in the Small Catechism. It isn't only a simple negative of "thou shall not," but the larger positive of how God's commands shape your life. So a command of not murdering eventually manages to push you toward helping your neighbor in all her needs. That's an utter insistence on not abdicating your responsibility in relationship, not thinking you can get off easy with minimal expectations.

That also invites a word at this spot in the reading about being "liable to the hell of fire." It's not likely Jesus is threatening eternal torment for you if you ever misbehave. The actual word is "Gehenna," the town garbage dump where waste was burned outside the city. It changes the hearing of this to have Jesus

say, "if you think you can get by with the least behavior toward people, that's rubbish, that's junk and you should be tossed out."

The following part against adultery maintains this standard for respecting each other. With its vigorous effort to quell chauvinism or objectification, it may seem almost the only way to avoid lust would be to shut off our TVs and not look at any sexualized advertising—nearly the modern equivalent of plucking out an offending eyeball. But Jesus is saying community relationships are *that* important to value.

The next saying on divorce arises from similar shared demands for practicing wellbeing. In Jesus' society, this was a word specifically to a man, that he should not take divorce so lightly as the legal standard of handing a certified piece of paper to his wife that ended the marriage and effectively abandoned her to a system where she would have little chance even of survival. So Jesus was telling men to take women's lives more seriously.

In the emotional weight of divorce in our time, we both know the concern of taking the relationship too lightly by not considering the harm and hurt divorce can cause, while we also know hurt and harm can cause the very need for divorce. In that way, we shouldn't reverse the apparent legalism of this saying as if Jesus were concerned only about the preservation of the institution or estate of marriage but ignoring the real point that he was actually striving for the wellness of the people in the marriage (or out of it).

Such complex distinctions are likewise in the phrase from Moses in our first reading. "Choose life" has become an earnest and faithful rallying cry primarily for those who oppose abortion and advocate amid the vulnerability of babies and before.

Yet I would suspect that the predominant earnest and faithful response amid those gathered here would press for a broader and

fuller understanding of "choosing life," that it can't be so simply limited to restricting abortions, but also should ask how we choose life for the mother-to-be, and what it would mean to be more adamant about a father-to-be's role in choosing life. Choosing life could go on to mean health care for the fetus during pregnancy, and maternity and paternity leaves for family bonding when the baby is born, and then education, and a safe environment free from pollution, and housing and careers, and so on until the very end. That's what it means to choose life, the full extent, and that's what Jesus must be calling us into.

While I hope this keeps motivating our sense of responsibilities to each other, of not letting ourselves off the hook, expanding rather than shrinking and shirking our commitments, it may also make us wonder if this is too much, if we're bound to feel worn down by impossible demands. Some have argued that's exactly the point of this section of the Sermon on the Mount, that it's more than we're capable of and leaves us condemned to realize how far we fall short of God's laws. Others have gone the opposite direction and figured that these big expectations will turn off some, but true Christians will take up the task of bringing about this utopia.

I commend yet another understanding. These are, indeed, guidelines of God's will, for how God wants us to live with each other. But God doesn't just instruct you to try as hard as possible and do the best you can at it, to give it your all. Sermons (I'll continue to remind you) aren't motivational speaking. They don't serve as pep talks. Rather, the essential thing of a sermon, the message that you need most to hear is the promise and assurance from God, a promise that is always trustworthy, where God's yes always means yes.

God promises you are loved, you are cherished, with you God is well-pleased. You ultimately are in God's care and have a place in

God's community. To return to our beginning, you are God's field. God is the farmer, not to grow some rare species of orchid, but here in the rows of this field, gathered in God's greenhouse of this worship space, you are tended and nurtured, cultivated, and fertilized, and pruned when you need to be. Here you are exposed to renewing and rejuvenating waters and find growth from the sun's rays, the photosynthesis of new creation as the Spirit fills you with God's energy.

With the assurance that you are God's field, it is clear that these instructions aren't a lecturing reprimand, insistently jibing that God expected a nice, strong, tall sequoia and so why are you so kudzu-ish, so unruly and ugly and counterproductive. Rather, if God wants a sequoia, that is exactly what God promises to bring to fruition in this world, including through your life and actions and potentials, no matter how un-sequoia-ish you expected yourself to be.