

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
4 Pentecost, Year B
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The Sleeping Gardener and Tree of Life

Last Saturday I found myself for the second time at Landmark Baptist Church on the west side. I was compelled to return because I realized that the kingdom of God could be compared to places like that. I was there at the invitation of a former Grace School parent who convenes these events every month. It was a community healing breakfast designed for folks who have been personally affected by gun violence but also open to others who want to walk alongside them and hear their stories.

We met in the church basement. Below the sanctuary. People shared about the loss they have experienced. A mother talked about what it was like to have a son and a daughter die of gun violence while another son is in prison for a crime he did not commit. Swirling around her words were the ever-present realities of systemic racism and all that it produces. Isolation, shame.

She is a leader of the group Mothers of Murdered Sons and Slain daughters. She bears witness to a power born from vulnerability and loss. Death and resurrection. Like one seed sown in the earth. Through her presence countless others realize they are not alone or stuck and find space to heal. In her own body, she is weaving branches together so that people burdened by so much might rest in her shade. Its roots connect to the tree of life.

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Ezekiel says, “I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.”

Two weeks ago at the yearly assembly of the Metro Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America we learned about the folded map project. It is a way of facing the overwhelming effects of red-lining and housing discrimination one small relationship at a time. Chicago is on a grid system, which means often there are two houses in the city with the same numbered address, just differentiated by “south” or “north.” This project connects people that have the same address but live on the other side of town. Map twins. Through those new relationships and conversations about housing, opportunity, and history, space is created to imagine a way forward for whole neighborhoods. From one seed nurtured in old soil projects and initiatives have sprung up bringing new life to people and houses left for dead. From the smallest

of seeds branches have formed offering shelter under their shade for those long exposed to the oppressive heat.

“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

The mustard seed. Like the people and places or parts of ourselves we may be tempted to overlook as too insignificant, small, or unworthy could be the very presence of the kingdom growing into the shade we need to be sheltered from the blazing sun of this world. Whose body or what place has become like a shady tree under whose branches you could finally rest securely and grow? It caused you to say “I can breathe, I am seen, I can loosen my shoulders and be myself, I finally have space to imagine my life being different.”

It was on the ground covered in the footprints of empire where Christ was led. There outside the city among the forgotten and cursed ones he hung between criminals. There was nothing desirable about his appearance. His body, like a seed buried in the ground, spent three days asleep in death only to rise again. His broken and risen body now the tree of life. In this place there is room for birds and creatures of every kind to nest in its branches. That is where we belong. In its embrace there is no more competing or hoarding. We are home. We each have a place. The shade just expands. That’s grace.

It may not be the largest, most appealing, or beautiful part of our building. It is like the mustard seed of 7300 Division. It is hidden away up multiple staircases. It is an empty apartment. Through a potential partnership with Housing Forward we are praying and exploring ways that this space might become a much needed shade and a safe place to nest for someone or a family searching for what we have. That’s what grace does. It keeps expanding, there is no disappearing shade here, no matter the time of day.

Who knows what this tiny seed might produce if others find the room they need in that available space. Who can fathom the future that might begin to unfold for us as we continue to tend that seed and ask the question, “what does it mean to be baptized disciples in this moment with all we have been given and all that others need?”

Martin Luther’s 7th mark of the church is the possession of the holy cross. The body of Christ is found where the wounded, forgotten, passed over, little ones, sinners, and broken ones find refuge and a voice. Just as we do around this table. Where places of death become gardens of life. As we witness. Where the ones the world shuns become teachers of new creation. Like Christ himself. Where the smallest of all seeds blossom into foliage so broad we cannot see where it ends and we are under its canopy.

