

Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

We recognize that the land where we gather for worship belongs to God, as does all of creation. We also acknowledge that the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – have lived on this land since before settlers of European descent claimed ownership and displaced those for whom it was home. As we pursue our goals to dismantle racism and attend to growing diversity, we lament this injustice in our history and commit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighborhood.

May we live with respect on this land and live in peace and friendship with its people.

➤ ***Dance with the Spirit***

MV 156 (repeat)

Call to Worship

It is good to give God thanks, to sing praises to the Most High!

We will sing for joy to God who has made us glad.

Let us declare God's steadfast love in the morning,
and God's faithfulness by night.

So come to worship God with thankful, joyful hearts!

Let us praise God's holy name together.

Let us pray...

† Prayer (adapted from PCC resources)

Living God, from you comes vitality, love and joy. Your peace is our companion – your love is our strength – your son is our hope. In even our darkest moments, your presence brings comfort. Hidden deep in the soil of life, your Spirit nurtures tiny seeds of purpose and potential to surprise us with new life. Like the earth beginning to bloom around us, so your kingdom unfolds to surprise us with new possibilities.

We bring you our prayers and praise this day, trusting that your Spirit will bring us the gifts we need to serve you in faithfulness, renewed by your love, through Christ our Lord.

Living, loving God, as we watch growth in our gardens and in the children around us, we confess we often resist growth and change as we grow older. We form ideas and opinions about many things – and cling to them. We think we already know what you desire from us – we fear new insights and new directions. Forgive us for thinking we already know it all. Forgive us for blocking out the concerns and commitments of those who differ with us. Open our eyes, our ears and our hearts to signs of new life.

Grant us faith like the mustard seed – so small and insignificant on its own, yet able to grow with your blessing to become a mighty sign of your lively kingdom among us. Forgive us and reinspire

us as we pray together...*Our Father, who art in heaven – hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen*

Words of Hope

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! We are forgiven – thanks be to God!

➤ *Shout to the Lord*

PWS&D's 2020 Impact video illustrates how, despite the challenges in 2020, your faithful support made a tremendous difference in many people's lives, addressing poverty, hunger and oppression, as well as urgent humanitarian needs in our international community.

Knox Book Box – share the history and hoped for future of this “mini library” project. Photo or video.

➤ *In the bulb there is a flower*

674

† Prayer for Understanding

God of patience and persistence, scripture tells us your people have not always listened for your leading. Send your Spirit to open our minds and hearts to your Living Word. Speak through the scriptures, and inspire our growth and gratitude, so that we may be changed by what we hear. Amen

Scripture

Ezekiel 17: 22-24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Mark 4: 26-34

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The

earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "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."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

I find myself strangely conflicted about today's reading from Mark's gospel. It is not a particularly controversial passage but in connection with recent events in our country and our denomination I am torn about how to approach these seemingly innocent seeds.

Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like the tiniest seed you can imagine, a seed that disappears into the soil and then produces consequences you could not dream of based on outward appearances alone – effects that, in the end, you don't even really understand!" Seeds are small and often buried or overlooked, but what power lies within them! Jesus offers parables that compare the sovereignty of God with the mysterious, hidden way of a seed's growth, a process that fascinates us even today. It's like that, Jesus says, the kingdom of God is like that: hidden and mysterious, and a very real wonder all the same.

And I agree with that – mostly. Because I think about my own life – the seeds that have been planted in me and those I have sown in others. I wonder about the fruit that has been – is being – and will be borne as a result of my years of public-school teaching and my years of ministry. I think about our sons – once tiny, now men – how much Steve and I depend on faith in God's grace to help us sow seeds of strength and kindness and hope as we parent. I ponder too the seeds of knowledge and faith that have been sown in me and how God is working unseen to create the harvest. What seeds of faith are you continuing to scatter as you journey each day?

But I also wonder about those less than positive seeds that have taken root in the world – in individuals who seem filled with hate and violence and cruelty. The person who murdered four people and seriously injured another in the community of London Ontario this past week disturbs me. How did seeds of such evil come to be scattered and take root in him? Where are these seeds of racism being stored and distributed – watered and nurtured? How can we disable and destroy such seeds? These seeds too are small and often overlooked or buried – but what power to harm lies within them!

I am also filled with the words from the Rainbow Communion special LGBTQI listening committee. I can hear in the video presentation (which I recommend all of you watch and reflect upon) – I can hear seeds of devaluing, dismissing, ignoring, and vilifying. Seeds of cruelty and harm that were sown by congregations, elders, ministers, and others in our churches across the country. Seeds that have crushed people – caused them to question and lose faith, to leave the church, to be excluded from family and friends and, in some cases, seeds that led to self-harm or suicide.

Did we know we were sowing seeds of destruction? Perhaps not. But we know now. It is time to cultivate a new garden – one filled with seeds of inclusion, hope and support. It may not be a perfect garden – I don't know that it is intended to be (that is why we are reformed and always reforming after all!) – but it can be beautiful. It can be a garden with a place in the world – a purpose and position – a site of welcome and rest and renewal.

Hence my conflict. I can see the image of seeds from many sides – the good, the bad, and the ugly – so I am challenged to remember that Jesus is focusing on a positive image to proclaim the kingdom of God – the a Divine Garden. Yet even as he uses the metaphor of the seed to explain the kingdom of God, he does so in a way that paints a somewhat counter-cultural – even ridiculous – picture.

In the first parable, a gardener scatters seed on the ground, and goes off to sleep. The seeds fend for themselves, and when the grain is ripe, the gardener harvests it. In the second parable, someone sows a tiny mustard seed in the ground, and it grows into a gigantic bush, large enough to offer birds shelter in its branches.

I wonder if these images make sense or if they are cosmic jokes intended to stretch our imaginations far beyond any place we'd take them on our own. What is the kingdom of God like? Are you sure you want to know? Okay, the kingdom of God is like a sleeping gardener, mysterious soil, an invasive weed, and a nuisance flock of birds.

I am not much of a gardener. I tend to get plants that are already started rather than sowing seeds – plants that look like they have a fighting chance at survival. To be a good gardener seems like too much work to me. Good gardeners don't toss a bunch of seeds into their backyards and then snooze away the growing season. They plan, plod, and hover. They make neat little rows in well-manicured beds. They keep a wary eye on the weather. They protect their gardens from birds, rabbits, and deer. From early spring until harvest time, they water, they fertilize, they prune, they weed, and they worry.

But the gardener in Jesus's parable? This gardener sleeps. She doesn't slog or micro-manage or second-guess. Instead, she enjoys the rest that comes from leaning into a process that is ancient, mysterious, cyclical, and sure. She trusts the seeds – trusts the soil – trusts the sun, the shade, the clouds, the rain. She participates in the process by planting and harvesting but never harbors the illusion of being in charge. This is the realm of mystery. In this story of the kingdom, it is not our striving, our piety, our doctrinal purity, or our impressive prayers that cause us to grow and thrive in God's Garden. It is grace alone.

I think there is a message in this for those negative seeds too – once planted the seed may grow even without our attention. We need to be so careful to plant the seeds we intend to plant and to avoid planting seeds that will ultimately result in damage. We need to intentionally sow values of kindness and caring.

The joke in the second parable is not only that mustard seeds are tiny, but that the people in Jesus's day didn't plant mustard seeds! Mustard was a weed – and a noxious, stubborn weed that would quickly take over the land, dropping seeds everywhere, and breaking down all barriers of separation between itself and the other plants in the garden. This is not a plant one would ever cultivate on purpose. Mustard grows like a weed, and it looks like one.

So what is Jesus saying? What does it mean to take an invasive, spindly weed – a plant we'd sooner discard than sow – and make it the very heart, the very structural center, of God's kingdom? Remember, Jesus himself comes to earth as tiny and forgettable – a *mustard seed* – a backwater baby born into poverty on the edges of empire. Who and what counts in God's vision? What is beautiful? Who matters? Where do we see the sacred?

This parable reminds us that we may think the seeds we sow are the best ones – the right ones – only to discover we have not understood God’s vision at all. Too often we plant seeds of sorrow instead of seeds of hope.

And what about the birds? It is a pretty image on the face of it – birds nesting and finding shade in the branches of the mustard plant. But really who wants birds out in the crops eating seeds and fruit? They eat all the cherries off the tree, and you get none! They wreak havoc in cornfields. Birds are why farmers put up scarecrows.

But not in this image. In this divine garden it is all about welcoming the unwelcome – sheltering the unwanted – practicing radical inclusion. The garden of God doesn’t exist for itself; it exists to offer nourishment to everyone the world deems unworthy. It exists to attract and to house the very people we’d rather shun. Its primary purpose is hospitality, not productivity.

So there are seeds and there are seeds. We need to take care with what we are sowing in the hearts of those around us. We need to constantly seek God’s grace to embrace the kingdom of God that Jesus envisions. **Amen**

➤ *The kingdom of God...*

787

† Offering and Prayer

The parables in Mark’s gospel remind us that God’s kingdom grows from small beginnings with surprising results. So, give to God as you are able, and trust that God will honour your generosity for the purposes of God’s Spirit at work among us and beyond us.

God of small seeds and secret growth, we bring our gifts to you, trusting that you will bless them. Use them as seeds of new life in our community and in your world. Grow results we cannot even imagine—within us, among us, because of us and beyond us, for the sake of Jesus, the Christ. Amen

➤ *I want Jesus to walk with me*

775 (PCUSA)

† Prayer (adapted from PCC resources)

Gracious God, come in your wisdom and plant seeds of your kingdom. You hold all things in your hands – watch over tender new life unfolding and bring it to maturity. We may plant seeds, but it is your mysterious power that brings forth the plant. We do our small part, but you bring growth and new life. Thank you for our place in your purposes. Guide our plans for ministry in the days ahead.

We pray for the troubled places of our world, especially those countries and communities still struggling with COVID-19 and those marked by violence and injustice...

...remember places in the world from the news this week.

We pray for our community and province as we rebuild common life and recover from the pandemic. We pray for those seeking work or rebuilding businesses, for those exhausted by months of service, and those still suffering the effects of COVID-19...

We pray for those who feel empty or lonely, who fear the future or mourn the past. We pray for those who suffer pain or grief, and for all whose lives have been on hold during these months of pandemic...

We pray for The Presbyterian Church in Canada, for its courts, committees, staff and agencies, as we come to terms with the decisions that came out of the General Assembly last week. Strengthen our local ministry and mission and help us learn new ways to reach out after the months of distancing and adapting to technological assistance.

Come in your wisdom and plant seeds of your kingdom. Watch over tender new life unfolding and bring it to maturity. Gracious God, you hold all things in your hand, including us. Keep us open to your Spirit's leading. In all that we do, help us embody the love of Jesus Christ. Amen

Blessing

God invites us to abundant life in Christ – live each day with joy and thanksgiving! May the grace of the risen Lord, the love of God and the nurturing community of the Spirit embrace us all.

➤ *Go now in peace, never be afraid*