

*Cedars and Weeds*

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

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

14 June 2009

I am a city girl. The one year in my whole life when I did not live in a city with over a million population, I was for all intents and purposes in a greater suburb of New York City. Jesus, though, was a country boy. His stories were about country living, which is why a city girl like me needs these things translated. Like these two sayings about seeds. About all I know of seeds is that great third-grade science experiment where you stick a lima bean in a baggie and watch it sprout. Come to think of it, I don't know what we did with it after that. Probably stuck it in a Styrofoam cup of dirt until it died of neglect. That's about the extent of my agricultural experience.

Which is why I had to be told that these two seeds stories are basically jokes. First we have the story of the negligent farmer. Actually, I can relate to this one. My next door neighbor decided to plant a garden, but she didn't know the first thing about gardening, and Sam and I have both gotten involved with her project. She literally scattered seeds on the ground. I had to tell her that she did need to cover them up a bit, not just lay them on the top. Then we waited. As Jesus says in the parable, we slept and rose night and day, and waited to see what would happen.

By some miracle we got rain in March, and in the course of time, green things started to pop up in my neighbor's patch. But which were seedlings and which were weeds? We didn't know. So we slept and rose night and day, and waited some more. A jumbled mess of plants rose up, all mixed together. First the stalk then the head, then at last flowers on the head. Now some of the plants are even taller than Sam! We, like the negligent farmer in the parable, don't know how it happened. The farmer, like us, scarcely tended his plants. He just scattered the seed and let God handle the rest. When the grain was ripe, then he stepped in again, ready for the harvest. This is not the kind of agricultural advice you would find in the Farmer's Almanac!

Then we have this other story about another seed. The mustard seed that grows into the greatest of trees, in which birds make their nest! Jesus is echoing this passage in Ezekiel, except he makes a crucial editorial change. Ezekiel talks about the mighty, noble cedar, which really is a huge tree. Cedars are associated with power and strength, and also holiness. The first temple was made out of cedar. People paid taxes to the king of Israel with cedar logs. The flag of Lebanon to this day carries an image of a cedar tree.

But when Jesus tells the story, he makes it into a mustard plant. A mustard plant is not a tree. In fact, it is a shrub. It has no large branches. No birds could possibly nest in it. More than that, it is a weed. No self-respecting farmer would plant one. It would be like saying, "A suburban lawn keeper went out and sowed dandelion weeds in the yard." It's a joke! Both these stories are jokes! City slickers like me don't get it, but Jesus' audience was ROARing! "The kingdom of heaven is like some clueless city girl trying to plant a garden! Can you imagine? HA HA HA! Except, hang on. This is what he's saying the kingdom of heaven is like? WHAT?!" Because if these are jokes, they are also lessons. Parables turn our understanding on its head. Perhaps the foolishness of the city slicker isn't so foolish after all!

These past two weekends I have been out of town at church conferences. They both in various ways have dealt with the health and growth of the church. In particular, two weeks ago I was at a conference on church multiplication, in which churches plant new churches. So our passages today are particularly relevant, because like the negligent farmer, the UCC

doesn't really have a clue! We don't know how to start new churches. We don't know how to do evangelism. It's a mystery! It would be very easy to get hopeless and despairing about our ignorance. But Jesus is telling us in these parables that it's okay. God is the one who does all the real work. We just have to sit back and let it happen.

You see, the way we've tried to manage church growth in the past has been through our mistaken belief that there is a right way to do it. We look at those big megachurches, those mighty cedars, and think this means they know what they're doing. We look at our little churches that seem so scrubby in comparison, like little weeds, and we think it means we've failed. So the UCC tended to focus on money and expertise and plans, even though we really had none of those things. We had high expectations, but thought it was all up to us, and when we got weeds instead of cedars, we thought that was a bad thing.

But Jesus is saying we don't have to be the experts. It's God who gives the growth. All we have to do is scatter the seed and reap the harvest. Take the remarkable story of Rick Warren and Saddleback Church. It's a huge church now, but we forget the fact that Rick Warren didn't have a clue what he was doing. He packed up his station wagon and moved to California where he knocked on people's doors to find out what they wanted in a church. He scattered the seeds, and when the time came he reaped the harvest. We might say he got lucky. But we might also say that it was God who gave the growth to a foolish but daring farmer who was willing to try anything.

At least now in the UCC we've realized that we don't know what we're doing. As Cameron Trimble, our point-person for church growth says, the philosophy now is that as long as it's not doing any harm, we should let people try anything. I sat at that meeting next to a member of the national evangelism team and told her apologetically about my two little, small churches, and she said, "What's wrong with being small?" You could have knocked me over with a mustard seed! What is wrong with being small? Ninety percent of churches in this country have fewer than 100 people in worship on a Sunday. There are mighty and majestic cedars, and we love to see them! Worshipping at Cathedral of Hope, which has tympani in their worship. Tympani! It's good to worship there. It does my church ego good to know that we do have some UCC cedars. But at the end of the day, I love my two little weeds. We may not be as big as the cedars, but we outnumber them!

It's not an "us versus them" scenario, not a "right versus wrong" way to do church. We aren't in competition with one another. A balanced ecosystem needs cedars *and* weeds. And weeds have some wonderful qualities. They are adaptable. You dig 'em up, and they're just going to spring up somewhere else. Our drought killed everything in the yard, but when the rains came in March, what were the first things that grew? The weeds! They're persistent. They're widespread. Even a paved parking lot can't stop them.

Weeds are diverse. They provide sustenance and shelter to all kinds of critters. Oh, those great cedar megachurches are practically an entire ecosystem in themselves. They can provide a diversity of programming and worship services. Their churches can be multiracial. They can have sign interpreters at every event, services in multiple languages. We mustard seed churches can't do all that. We can do one or two things. But where there are a hundred mustard seed churches, each one doing one or two things, that amounts to one or two hundred things! Even Cathedral of Hope can't do that many!

Whether we are weeds or cedars, we all too often tend to see ourselves in isolation, as if we make up the sum total of the existence of the world, rather than seeing ourselves as part of a larger ecosystem, each with our own role to play in the greater scheme of things. The thing is that whether we are cedars or weeds, we exist by the grace of God. It is God who gives us the growth, not our own efforts. Our role, according to the parable, is to scatter the seeds and reap the harvest.

The amazing thing about God is that God can make use of both cedars and weeds. God will make a way no matter what is planted.

So how has God used these two little weeds that I am the farmer of? Spirit of Peace, the church whose seeds I scattered myself. We were by no means the first ONA church in this conference, but in the first year of existence we organized an ONA workshop, and God certainly was the one who managed to pull that off for us! Every year we have held that workshop, and most years we've managed to have an ONA gathering at the conference annual meeting. And every year, a couple more churches have become ONA. We can't take direct credit for that, but we have certainly had a hand in it. As a result, there's only one conference in the UCC that has a higher percentage of ONA churches than we. Give it another year or two, and twenty-five percent of the churches in this conference will be ONA. Spirit of Peace did that, not Cathedral of Hope!

Other little things we do: at Easter we cook a meal for about 100 people. We give almost \$5000 to OCWM every year, that's more than most churches in our conference!

Community. A church whose seeds I did not scatter. I came to an existing garden. Twice a year we have a sausage dinner. People come from out of town to attend it. People plan trips back to San Antonio around it. It's more than just feeding people. It provides hospitality, continuity, stability in an ever-changing world. That dinner means something to the people who come. There's a quality of hospitality and welcome at Community that folks just don't find other places. Cathedral of Hope provides meals for people too. But I doubt anyone plans a trip to Dallas just to eat at that church.

Community may not have a lot of money, but they consistently give to charities both locally and nationally. We are now a "five for five" church. It's not a lot, but then President Obama raised an unprecedented amount of money for his campaign from contributions of \$50 or less. Those weeds add up!

[The story of the starfish on the beach.]

These are little, tiny things that seem scrawny compared to the mighty cedars. But the lesson here is that nothing is too small for God. God knows when each sparrow falls. Of how much more worth are you? We don't have to be experts. We don't have to know what we're doing. We don't have to rely on our own skills and abilities. God takes care of that. All we have to do is scatter the seeds and reap the harvest. Surely we can do that. Can't we?