

“God and Gardens”

Before I get started, I should say that I spend a lot of time with trees. I have been studying them and how they interact with the environment for the past three and a half years as part of my research for my thesis in soil science. As such, it is no surprise that they have made their way into today’s message. It is full of analogies using plants, gardens and gardeners but I will be repeatedly coming back to the image of the common, but remarkable, Trembling aspen.

We have heard about the mustard seed growing into the largest and shadiest of garden shrubs but I would like to suggest another more local and familiar analogy. Consider the Trembling aspen. All of us have experienced the summer snow produced by poplar trees who release those little specks of white fluff to blow around with the wind. But have you ever looked carefully enough to see the tiny seed inside. The seed is so small and fragile that almost none of these seeds will live. In fact it may be years, decades or even centuries in between times when conditions are right for seeds to germinate. But once a single, solitary, minuscule seed begins to grow then the world can be forever changed.

The Trembling aspen grows quickly from seedling to maturity but still it may seem rather small and insignificant when compared to the trees around it. At the very least it is unimpressive. This single tree will never be the biggest or the longest lived but that is only at first glance. Underground the tree begins to send out roots away from its stem both soaking up water and nutrients and also looking to expand. Along the length of each root new shoots begin to develop and if there is enough sunlight available new stems begin to grow. These new stems require more water and nutrients and so the roots push out further and with them more and more stems begin to grow. Even though these stems may have grown for up to a hundred years or more and look to be separate trees they all stay connected and rooted in the same soil transferring water and nutrients from tree to tree nourishing all to sustain the young and the old.

We find it difficult in this age of consumption to put aside our appetite for material things. When shopping has become our cultural identity, it is very difficult to break these patterns. We would be weird if we used public transit, or sloppy if we wore the same outfit every week, or impractical if we grew our own food. However tearing down these habits can be liberating. In the early church none had need because material resources were shared. The possibilities are staggering when considering what could be accomplished if there was genuine sharing of time. Could you imagine a church community working together on a level comparable to the barn raisings of the Amish? Not only what could be accomplished but also the level of true relationship that would take place.

The advent of global exploitation of people and natural systems has allowed us to live oblivious to the damage we cause. We are told everyday by our society that we deserve this or that but it is really the people and environments that we abuse that deserve better. Jesus was crucified for calling out the hypocrisy of the ruling religious officials. Early anabaptists were persecuted for pointing out the faults of the institutional church. We don’t need to head towards actual physical martyrdom, but the church needs to remember that it has been and can be the better way. We need to be willing to give up problematic behaviours, to end our own hypocrisy knowing that doing so will cause us some inconvenience and perhaps some loss in social standing with the outside world. What is needed is a network of support on all scales, personal, local, regional, national and international. We need to rely on community not stores for our wellbeing. By encouraging and building each other up as it says in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 the church can again be the subversive counter culture it has always been. It is very difficult to be

the only one who is different but remember, we have been promised, “where two or three come together,” God will also be. It is only in this way that the church remains relevant today.

Each new aspen stem is a copy of the original stem. Though each stem may look slightly different, depending on where it sprouted what surrounds it, each is genetically identical and all the stems act in unison. And this happens to be the perfect time of year to see this. You can easily pick out groups of trees within a poplar bluff where each is at the same stage of leafing out. These groups are actually a single plant. We are all called to act as copies of Christ. Jesus said, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” Not, I am the grapevine you are the carrots, potatoes, or corn. We are extensions of Christ himself. God became human in Jesus Christ. It is one of the most foundational and often most confusing realities of our faith. Jesus was human. Therefore to truly embrace being human is to be like Jesus. We are to be copies of Christ for the world not to fulfill our own dreams and plans for the church but to perpetuate and be advocates for the plan which God had before Earth was created and was made tangible in Jesus. Mark 4:26-28 reads: He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain -- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.” We cannot predict or direct the kingdom of God but we can live in it and be it by keeping Jesus’ commandments. In doing so we will live noticeably different from the people around us. In this way even though people cannot say, “Here it is! Once you cross this line you will be in the kingdom of God,” we will be able to see it in each other and others will see it in us. “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.” And so Christ will be known to the world through us by the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness.

For a tree to be healthy and bear good fruit, it must be rooted in fertile soil. “A farmer went out to sow some of his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path: it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” Love is the greatest commandment and the foundation of Christian living. It is what makes our spiritual soil fertile. It would mean nothing to share all of our resources and time but not share love. But if we are “rooted and established in love,” we will be astonished at what can be accomplished and the love that will be returned.

The kingdom of God will move like the wind and the sun. It cannot be captured nor contained but is free for all. We cannot control it, but we will be able to work with it; to borrow some of its power and spread its energy through to the people around us. As aspen spread they can quickly become the dominant species in a forest, yet they are constructed in such a way that other species are encouraged to live alongside and underneath them. Whereas many trees aim to soak up as much sun as possible to both nourish the tree and also kill off any competitors, aspen have a specially designed leaf which allows it to flutter in the wind and this fluttering lets light down to the plants below. Light is given, not to young aspen but to shrubs, small plants and grasses all competing for the same essential resources as the aspen itself.

Jesus told another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weed come from?’

“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.’”

We cannot live and be separated from everyone else. If there is ‘us’ and ‘them,’ we more than likely fit better into our description of the ‘them’ category. Fortunately there is still hope. While plants are easily identifiable as individuals aboveground, underneath the soil a remarkable thing occurs. Symbiotic relationships take hold between fungi living in the soil and the roots of the plant. Certain types of fungi live on and in plant roots. These fungi are given energy by the plant and in return they seek out water and nutrients to sustain both themselves and the plant. Sometimes, the fungi form relationships with more than one plant, and not necessarily of the same species, thereby creating a link between them. This is a wonderful analogy for how we can have a presence in the world. The church is the aspen with an expansive network of large roots connecting its members. The fungi is the Holy Spirit. It is difficult to see with the naked eye but it is what truly makes it possible for the church to be infectious, to grow and be sustained. The church lives and works in amongst the other plants of the forest growing in close proximity and in relationship. The Holy Spirit takes these opportunities to link outsiders to the church. We only need to be in the right place at the right time and willing to give up some of our energy. But let us make sure to bear good fruits so that it will be recognizable as to the source of this connection.

Death is inevitable and after eighty years of growth an aspen stem becomes old. Its growth slows and the wood weakens and begins to fall apart. Death can also come violently. People and fire can quickly consume and burn everything in their paths. Yet, this is not the end, for with each death the hormones in the roots shift and this encourages new shoots to grow into the spaces left by the deceased. And so, life for the tree continues well beyond the age of any individual stem. But death and the promise of the life thereafter is no invitation to lazy living.

We must be careful of the, “I am already saved because I have faith in Jesus,” attitude. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven,” and, “Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” John 3:16 is not a free ticket for heaven. It is Jesus saying, “Trust me, I am the only one who knows about these things.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains, “For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience.” Therefore whoever believes Jesus’s teachings and therefore acts on them because they believe they are from God will not perish in the fires or at the harvest.

What then are we asked to do? We are to have a practical spirituality, not hiding in rhetoric but living out faith in tangible ways. In another parable of Jesus’, he says:

“There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vinyard.’

“‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will sir,’ but he did not go.

“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

The answer is the first. Practical spirituality may mean lending a hand to someone in need, volunteering your time for a worthwhile cause, or sharing your possessions with the people around you. However, I believe that living in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven means far more than these niceties. It means thorough examination of one's life and actions in the context of how we affect not only the people near to us but those neighbours far a while who toil on our behalf. It means looking for shortcomings in the way society conducts the day to day and being willing to stand out in opposition to them by peaceful rebellions. It means that the church is a community supporting each other in all aspects of life including the other 166 hours of the week, 167 if you don't make it to Sunday school. It means realizing that the luxuries we have around us are in fact excesses that someone else is paying for and not accepting that this is okay. It means proactively building relationships, community and the physical supports required to maintain them. Yet we must start small. It could be with a garden in your backyard. A place to share work, knowledge, thoughts, prayers and joy. A place to share food and fellowship. A place to begin to rebuild community. Society has become increasingly complicated and self-interested. It is time to rethink our actions from the ground up.

Practical spirituality means looking ahead to the future. The kingdom is bigger than all of us combined and will only continue to grow in ways we can't possibly predict. In the past, led by Jesus' example, members of the church have looked for ways in which they might meet challenges of the day with integrity rather than joining complaining masses. We are active participants in God's garden of Earth. Not only to tend for the plants and animals as was the job of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, but to tend to one another.

“Pando,” meaning, “I spread,” is the name given to a stand of Trembling aspen in Utah. It is a single organism which has grown from a solitary seed to form an entire forest consisting of 47,000 stems, weighing 6000 tonnes, and covering 107 acres. Though single stems seldom grow older than 130 years, the organism itself is officially dated at 80,000 years old and some experts suggest that it may be as old as 1 million years. And this may not be the largest or oldest aspen tree alive today.

Yes, the kingdom of God is like a Trembling aspen, humble but pervasive beyond comprehension. It grows from person to person, each new member extending its reach. The members support one another so that there is no need and the whole is supported by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in us, strengthens us and bridges gaps between us and the people around us so that they too may join the kingdom. The kingdom lives peaceably with those who live alongside it never hindering but supporting them as well. We will be known and judged by our actions, our fruits, and to ensure that our actions are acceptable we must base our decisions on love. The kingdom of God is bigger than any of us, bigger than all of us but it requires our energy and effort to make it grow.