

Proper VI Year B: 16/17 June 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Rev. Gary Cyr

...the Kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed

Ezekiel 17: 22-24

2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, 14-17

Mark 4: 26-34

Psalm 92: 1-4, 11-14

"God's word is often planted in the most unlikely of places, found in the humblest of voices. And it is enough to bring hope and deliverance to those in most need of freedom and liberation from oppression and undeserved violence."

This past Tuesday, I joined with four other colleagues from the Diocese of Central NY, to participate in the Pride Interfaith service which was held at Temple Concord in Syracuse. Members of various faith traditions had gathered together in this Jewish synagogue to celebrate the wide variety of human expressiveness, and to honor the Ground-of-our-Being for creating such diversity. As 150 plus individuals joined in worshipful song to give praise to our Creating God, it gave testament to God's abundant grace and love. In listening to Buddhist chant, an Iman's sung prayer, and being led in song by the Rabbinic cantor we celebrated God's wonderful diversity in all its glory.

We also had the opportunity to light candles in memory of those who are no longer with us and to victims of violence and oppression; from the sounding of the Shofar, we were led into prayer and reflection as we listened to three guest speakers share parts of their own life's journey. In one of those stories, we heard a young pastor tell of her experience when she was asked by someone of another denomination why have a Pride service or parade, after all, isn't pride a sin?

Indeed, pride is a sin, especially when it feeds our egos to the point of indifference and arrogance. Pride is sinful when it leads to unearned power that is misused against minority groups and disenfranchised individuals. Yes, self-serving pride is sinful, but Pride itself,

especially in the context of a persecuted social group, is the antitheses of shame. As such, Pride is the antidote to shame.

Shame is an emotional weapon used to silence those who differ from social norms, to punish those who stand out from traditional religious understanding. Shame is utilized in arguing for conformity without understanding. Blind allegiance to statistical information and religious laws *is* sinful pride. Such shame casted on minority groups fosters hatred and discord and does nothing to usher in God's Kin-dom where God's reign of justice and peace will prevail. Such a Kin-dom is metaphorically symbolized in the bible as a mustard seed.

This lowly plant that's marginally important and mostly seen as a weed with its significantly tiny seed is Jesus' favorite way of speaking about God's movement in our lives and in the world. Now it should seem silly, if not outright absurd, for anyone to refer to God's reign being like a mustard seed, and it is crazy notion. That's the point of a parable to begin with. Their absurdity is intentional in that they help shift how we see ourselves, see God, and see others. Parables are thrown alongside our lives to spark our imagination and question the ordinary orderliness of our lived lives.

Jesus knew full well that using an agrarian image would resonate with his audience. After all, the mustard plant is not the friend of farmers or home gardeners. It can be an invasive plant, taking over wherever it's sown. And what farmer would intentionally sow such a plant? None. Even today, if it's found in a flower bed or garden plot, you pull it out. It's a nuisance. And yet Jesus has the audacity to suggest that it's thrown around with no rhyme or reason to it, that it grows without human effort or intervention, and establishes itself in the ground that it's sown upon. That is God's Kin-dom, that is God's Word being sown wherever it finds a home. And for a little comic relief, Jesus is juxtaposing the mustard plant with the mighty cedars of Lebanon we hear about in Ezekiel.

God takes a sprig from the top of a mighty cedar, plants it on a lofty mountain where it will grow and stand tall and proud. This mighty tree will be a noble symbol of Israel's kin-dom and reign. But not God's. Such pride as is expressed in Ezekiel is indeed sinful in its arrogance. It wasn't God's intention that the nation would seize power and lord it over others, but that Israel would be a blessing unto the nations. Something got lost in the translation between the

prophetic voice and the civil and religious rulers of the time. Thus, Jesus makes this crazy comparison that God's Kin-dom is like a mustard seed.

The message is simple, God's kin-dom is not found among the powerful, wealthy, and elites. God's kin-dom is found in the small and lowly, the meek and humble. God's word is often planted in the most unlikely of places, found in the humblest of voices. And it is enough to bring hope and deliverance to those in most need of freedom and liberation from oppression and undeserved violence.

Who are the marginalized today? Who are the oppressed in our midst? Who are the powerful yielding violence against the meek? Pride month isn't just for the LBGTQIA+ community, it's for all those who are victimized, whether male or female, gay or straight, immigrant or resident alien, regardless of ethnicity or gender expression. It is Pride in the human condition as simply being a child of God made in God's image. If Jesus' words have any meaning today, it's that the Kin-dom of God takes root in the most unlikely of places in the most unassuming of individuals.

Indeed, the Kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed. Such a message is one of hope for the discouraged and persecuted. And faith in God's Word is a gift, not for our privatized preferences, but as a source of light and hope to others. That is what Pride month reminds all of us of: that we are to be a source of light and hope to others knowing that God's Word is at work in the least of those among us.