

So, I have this plant in my yard.

I don't know what kind of plant it is except that it has thin little branches that grow really quickly, and they are covered in very sharp thorns.

I guess you'd call it a vine since many of these thin branches grow right up from the ground and then they grow in and around any other plant they can wrap themselves around.

I don't mind this plant except that it's really annoying in certain areas of my yard.

For example, it grows along the back of the house, which is fine, but then it creeps into the space right by my back door.

So every time I go in and out the door, I end up scratching my leg on this thorny vine.

I do that enough times before I finally get out the pruning sheers and prune it back, away from the path of foot traffic.

Sometimes I think that having faith in God is a little bit like this vine.

Having faith is well and good and harmless as long as it doesn't bump up against any of the big decisions we have to make, as long as it doesn't interfere with the things we really like to do, the indulgences that we really enjoy.

Having faith is nice so long as I can still judge the people I don't like and criticize the people I disagree with and only surround myself with like-minded people who don't challenge me or otherwise scratch my legs.

But that's not how a life of faith works, it has to overtake every aspect of our lives.

It has to influence the decisions we make, the way we view the world, the instant judgments we make.

When I want to spend an egregious amount of money on something, my thorny faith pokes me and reminds me that money would be better spent elsewhere.

When I am complaining about something insignificant, my faith scratches me and reminds me that my life is actually really, really good, and I have basically nothing to complain about.

When I am with a group and I want something to go my way, and it doesn't, I get poked again by those pesky thorns.

I am reminded that it's not all about me, and that being a person of faith means being humble enough to remember that I am not always right and it's okay to do things other people's way sometimes.

Having faith in God and a commitment to Jesus is not convenient or easy.

If you want to be part of an easy, fun social club, then I suggest you find one someplace other than the church.

Because while I do hope that the church is a place where we are social and friendly and we love up on each other, this place will also change your life in unexpected ways.

This faith that will be cultivated in you, maybe even without your explicit permission, will cause you to challenge the ways you view the world and interact with it.

It will cause you to make decisions that you wouldn't have made in the past, and you might even surprise yourself.

This faith will cause you to give up those superficial things that you used to think brought you joy.

But then this faith will make you realize that they didn't bring you ultimate joy, that instead, being generous with your time and money and attention, that's what is joyful and life giving.

Jesus' parables were not meant to be fables.

They weren't simple stories with digestible truths like the tortoise and the hare or the boy who cried wolf.

Jesus' parables were meant to be disruptive; to interrupt what you thought you knew rather than just reaffirming the truth you already know.

They were meant to confront his followers with an uncomfortable truth that challenged their lives.

Parables were something like the sharp thorny bushes that I have in my yard, invasive, inconvenient, yet hopefully miraculously life changing.

This morning we heard Jesus' famous parable about the mustard seed, which I am sure some of you have heard many sermons on.

The thing about the mustard plant is that it's not a majestic tree, it wasn't even a pretty flowering shrub that we might want to plant on our property.

It was an invasive weed, something you want to keep out of your garden because it runs amok easily, gets out of hand, and nearly takes over whatever ground it infests.

In Jesus' time, his followers knew all about the Cedar tree.

The Roman Empire was compared to this Cedar tree, which can grow up to 130 feet tall!

The mustard seed is something with great power, it grows quickly, spreads itself throughout the landscape, but it doesn't have the prominence that other plants have.

It's not tall, sturdy and stately like the mighty Cedar tree.

But it is able to survive and thrive and spread because many, many of those tiny seeds germinate.

It's not just one big tree, it's many small plants that grow together, and make a nebulous network of interconnected plants.

I love thinking about the realm of God in this way.

The realm of God won't be brought about because one powerful person made it so.

It comes about because each of us, like one little, infectious mustard plant, grow, and then we grow together and we are strengthened by growing in and around each other.

And together we change the landscape.

Unceremoniously.

Subversively.

And the next thing you know, this earth is transformed by faithful people who believe that working together, and living for each other is so much more valuable than living for ourselves alone.

This world is changed by this pesky, invasive seed of faith.

First it takes over our lives, as individuals, and it doesn't let go.

It fills us with hope, even when hope seems hopeless, it compels us to act when we otherwise would have ignored.

And by changing each of us, this seed of hope, of love, it then takes over communities, and we organize.

We stand up when people hurt our neighbors.

We find solutions when people in our town are struggling or are hungry or are in pain or can't afford their housing anymore.

Then it changes our national consciousness and people of faith get together when we learn that children are being kept in cages, away from their parents.

We stand up when the decisions our government is making are letting us down because we know, that as a nation, we are so much better than this.

Then we reach out to people of other nations who are suffering and we work together, like we are with our friends in Uganda, because we know that we are all God's beloved children and nobody is worthy of more resources than anyone else.

This shrub, it gets a hold of you and it doesn't let go, it changes your life.

It's inconvenient and makes you adjust your outlook and your actions and then once this faith has a hold on you, you start to connect with others who are also people of faith, in places like this house of worship.

And we pray and sing and praise God together and this shrub of faith that comes from a tiny seed, it has been growing in each of us, and since we've been gathering together, now we are growing together.

And our stories get intertwined and our values are shared and our community is one and the same and we are impossible to contain and before you know it, our global consciousness is changed.

I don't know how this sounds to the powerful, prestigious, privileged people of our world.

But I do know how it sound to those who are struggling, who don't feel accepted, who wonder about the future or who have experienced significant loss or rejection.

Jesus tells his disciples that when the mustard seed grows up, it puts forth large branches and the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

Anyone who needs a safe place to land can find one in the beautiful, nebulous network that people of faith have created.

And when God's realm covers the whole earth, all places will be safe, no place will be dangerous or violent.

Now we aren't there yet, we'll get there though, one day.

That's where our hope comes from.

But for now we live day-by-day, growing one shrub at a time, one person of faith at a time, added to our invasive ground-covering.

And people who have felt rejected or threatened for who they are or who they love or what they believe, people who are flying, who are so tired, who don't know where they can land, because they don't know if it will be safe.

They don't know if they walk through those church doors if they'll be welcomed.

We are here to say that you can rest here, you can land here.

Anyone who is afraid, unsafe, threatened, scared, insecure, anyone who feels like there's not enough to go around, you can find a home here.

Here, in these branches, there's plenty of room for you and more than enough to go around.

Friends, followers of Jesus, we'll never be mighty.

We will never be the giant Cedar tree or the mighty Redwood Trees like the ones out in California.

That is not our calling.

We are thousands of unassuming shrub brushes.

You know that thorny seed of faith, which has germinated in your life, which might seem inconvenient and obtrusive.

It's the one that pokes you whenever you're about to make an unfaithful decision or whenever you have an unkind thought about someone else.

Let it grow.

Let it flourish in your life.

It is only through each of us, nurturing that seed, that we are going to grow together, to be a united force of people of faith.

This is the realm of God, which will give us the power to change the world.

Amen.

Rev. Wells- UCC Burlington