

4 Pentecost, June 16, 2024, Ex 17, Ps 92, 2 Cor 5:6-10, Mark 4:26-34; St Mark's MKE  
The Rev. Mary S. Trainor

Aren't the gardens here in Milwaukee flourishing? There is so much green! I love to look at all the different shades of green, and the textures of leaves. I lived for many years in the Southwest, and I would come back here every year to visit. On those visits at this time of year, my eyes and brain had to go through an adjustment because the plants were so lush, diverse, colorful compared to the dry brown desert. We are truly fortunate here to have vegetation that flourishes so abundantly! This morning's readings are about flourishing: plants flourishing, and us flourishing spiritually. To flourish means to thrive, to prosper. If we are flourishing, it means that most of the time we experience positive emotions: we're engaged with the world, have meaning and purpose in our lives. We all want to flourish! Our Scripture readings this morning help us to flourish, like flourishing plants around us. Let's look at each of our bible readings.

Both of our Old Testament readings, first from the Prophet Ezekiel and then the Psalm, reference cedar trees that are flourishing. In Ezekiel, we hear God saying ***"I will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; 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."*** White cedar trees are abundant around us in Wisconsin. They have cones and flat evergreen needles; some varieties are known as *Arbor Vitae* or the tree of life (*called this because a 16<sup>th</sup> Century ship captain discovered that chewing on cedar prevents scurvy*). Cedar trees reproduce by sprouts from a branch or from seeds, and here Ezekiel is talking about a planted branch that grows into a huge tree. In Psalm 92, we heard the Psalmist say to God, ***"I shout for joy because of the works of your hands. The righteous shall flourish... and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God; They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be green and succulent."*** The Psalm writer is joyful because of witnessing the flourishing of those who are planted in God's soil, having fulfilled spiritual lives! In today's Gospel, Jesus told parables about two types of seeds, in two different circumstances-both flourishing. The scattered seed and the tiny mustard seed flourish; they were planted in good soil! For us to be planted in good soil means digging our roots into the rich soil of Christ.

God using seeds as a metaphor for us fits.

- In both us and seeds, growth is a process that takes time– it's not instant.
- In seeds, the fullness of life is present. In us, the fullness of God is present.
- Seeds have protective coats surrounding the embryo; growth happens when the seed coat breaks open and water, nutrients penetrate. Some seeds, like coneflowers, okra, milkweed, nasturtiums, can remain dormant for many years as the environment isn't right to get through the tough protective coat. We too have protective coats that, when broken open, God's love is received. We can go for years resisting God's love, and then we remain spiritually dormant. We have two main ways we put up invisible protective coats: self-sufficiency and low self-image. When we are self-sufficient, we fool ourselves into thinking we can do it on our own, that we don't need God. When we have a low self-image, we feel so unworthy to approach God that we keep God at arm's length. It's like Taylor Swift says in her song "antihero;" ***"It's me, I'm the problem. It's me."*** Our protective coatings, our stubborn self-sufficient or self-critical selves, prevent us from experiencing and growing in God's love. God wants each of us to flourish, and God offers us everything we need to flourish- but it takes faith and trust to accept

God's love, to let that love through our invisible protective coats. Paul said at in our Epistle reading this morning, "***We walk by faith not by sight...The love of Christ urges us on...he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves...regard no one from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.***" We already know how to walk by sight, that's what we do - we live from an earthly perspective. But walking by faith, whew, that is another thing. When we walk by faith, we have an eternal perspective – we trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God – and when we do God comes flooding into our invisible protective coats.

One remarkable woman, Linda, taught me about walking by faith. She suffered from an incurable illness – and yet she was so animated and full of life in our visits. Linda lived for many years with this illness, suffering through her treatments. She said, "**God is not the source of my illness, but God is the source of my strength and determination.**" Always Christ was in her and she was in Christ. Linda allowed God's love through her protective coat, and she flourished. She said that she sensed God's presence even in the hardest times. Christ urged Linda on.

Flourishing spiritually doesn't mean our lives are perfect in all ways, it does mean that we are connected to the divine, being "in Christ." When we are "in Christ" we talk with Jesus as the day goes, gaining strength to make the right decisions or say the right thing or take a step in the right direction. When we are "in Christ" we are nurtured by God's soil so much that we are changed for the better. When we are "in Christ" we share freely with God our love as well as our complaints, frustrations, grief, suffering. This is prayer. Author Anne Lamott says this: "**It doesn't matter how you pray-with your head bowed in silence, or crying out in grief, or dancing. Churches are good for prayer, but so are garages and cars and mountains and showers and dance floors.**"

The love of Jesus provides the rich, nutritious soil for you to surround yourself with and flourish. God wants YOU to flourish, and urges you on! When you allow God's love to break into your invisible protective coat, you will flourish. This is not a one and done thing, it is something I have to do every day: invite Jesus to break into my messy life. Our flourishing, our living "in Christ," is a process that God wants to continue in you. Just like God has prepared the seeds and trees to grow and flourish in the earth, God equips you to flourish in Christ. The more you invite Jesus in, the more you will flourish. Allow Jesus to love you. Life springs from Jesus' love. Amen.