

June 14, 2009
Lectionary 11
Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4:26-34
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

GREEN SPACE

Where's our summer? That was one of the headlines in the Chicago Tribune on Friday. Doesn't it seem a little late to still be wearing long-sleeve shirts in mid-June? The article called the weather of late "awful." And goes on to say that "in place of picnics, bike rides and long lunch hours under sunny skies, outdoor waiters are missing out on tips, Little Leaguers are losing practice time and school-age kids are trapped inside on their first precious days of summer break."

It's not as if it isn't green and beautiful. Rainfall is five inches over the average for this time of year. And the rain has made the vegetation stunningly lush. It's just that we want to be outside soaking it all in. We want to be in green spaces: parks, backyards, playing fields, golf courses, gardens, to name a few.

I love the city. I love its urban energy. But years ago I realized that if I couldn't occasionally get to a park, or the lake, or a green space, I would get out of balance, maybe even a little cranky. In our electronic and technological age we easily lose our connection to the earth and sky. To the four seasons. To the natural rhythms of nature. And to the lessons they have to impart.

Imagine the time before electricity and cell phones and computers and all-night grocery stores and a thousand channels of 24/7 cable. Imagine being closely connected to the earth and to its growing season. Imagine living off the land and waiting for fruits and vegetables to grow rather than buying tomatoes all year round from the Jewel.

Our ancestors lived in such a green space. And the biblical writers use green imagery all the time. The first chapters of Genesis are about a garden. In today's passage from Ezekiel God is a lumberjack who chops off the top of a tree to replant it in Jerusalem. Even though the people were in exile, God promised that through the messiah there would be a tree. And in the branches of this tree, birds of every kind—in other words, all people of earth—would find refuge and shelter.

Jesus continues the green talk. The kingdom of God is a mystery. We think we're in control. But look at the parable of the seed. The man does nothing but plant it. The ground produces of itself: the stalk, the head, the full grain in the head. The original Greek suggests something amazing: the ground is literally automatic. Earth that can be trusted to yield its fruit even without our worry or good intention. Even without manure or fertilizer.

Or the mustard seed. Jesus wants the disciples to think green. To not give up hope. The reign of God grows from humble beginnings into something mighty. Seeds are being sown. The harvest is yet to come. And don't forget: at the very end of the Bible is the tree of life, with fruit for the healing of the nations.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." Many of us are humbled by how much we don't know. So we may surf the web and read books (or Kindle) in order to acquire knowledge or information that we need. But what might we learn from seeds and sprouts, plants and trees, flowers and shrubs?

Hear some lines from a Native American prayer:

*Earth, teach me stillness,
as the grasses are stilled with light.
Earth, teach me humility
as blossoms are humble with beginning.
Earth teach me courage
as the tree which stands all alone.
Earth teach me resignation
as the leaves which die in the fall.
Earth teach me regeneration
as the seed which rises in the spring.
Earth teach me to forget myself
as melted snow forgets its life.*

*Earth teach me to remember kindness
as dry fields weep with rain.*

(in *Earth Prayers from Around the World*, ed. by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon)

All right, green is my favorite color. And yes, we have returned to green vestments today and this “green season” will extend into late November. It’s the welcome reminder to get out to some green space. Someone once said that when we are feeling sorry for ourselves or consumed with our own problems, we need to get out into nature. To sit under a tree. To look at the stars. To gaze at the ocean. To forget ourselves. For to realize our place in the universe may move us from self-pity to wonder and gratitude.

Hidegaard of Bingen was a twelfth-century mystic who described the Holy Spirit as the greening power of God. When we are thirsty and shriveled we seek the green energy of God which causes us to flower and to come into full bloom.

We are fortunate to have our own green space at Holy Trinity. In a city of concrete and steel we have a garden to delight our eyes and refresh our spirits. A garden brings beauty to a world that is sometimes ugly and filled with hate. To spend time in a garden is to let its green energy settle in us. To slow us down. To reconnect us to the earth, to our breath, to our roots, to the Spirit deep within us.

In the past several years our congregation has seen the beginnings of a green team that encourages eco-spirituality and attention to simplicity, conservation, recycling and care for the earth. We hope that more and more of us will take up the call to be bearers of the green in our homes, neighborhoods and workplaces.

As lovers of God’s green creation, we are all sent out to make our lives more green. To get more connected to the cycles of nature. To encourage care for the earth, for the air, for the soil, for trees and plants, for rivers, lakes and oceans.

When warmer weather does arrive (and trust the earth: it will) we will bask in the great green summer. We will play and picnic in parks and gardens. Our tables will overflow with the fruits of the earth. It doesn’t get much better than that.

And amid it all we will receive this wondrous gift: green wisdom from mother earth. And the call to bring green space to our hearts and to our homes. To our neighborhoods and to our cities.