

Nathan Brown
"Let the Weeds Take Over"
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West Side Christian Church

Mark 4:26-34

The Kingdom of God is like a seed that grows into a weed the size of a shrub. That's what Jesus tells us this morning. Sound confusing? Well, you are no more confused than any farmer would be at hearing this parable either as a part of Jesus' audience in the first century or in hearing it in worship today.

The Kingdom of God and mustard weeds don't seem to belong in the same sentence! Yes, mustard is a weed. It is indeed an herb with medicinal properties and one that is useful for flavoring and preserving food. The mustard bush, though, is a garden pest. No one would sow it on purpose. It grows all too readily on its own, and once it appears, it takes over the field. Why would Jesus compare the kingdom of God to an overgrown weed?

Recently, the District VIII Disciples Clergy, here in the Tidewater area of Virginia, came together to discuss an article printed in the April 4th edition of Newsweek Magazine. The article is entitled, "The End of Christian America," and is written by Jon Meachem.

In the article, Meachem refers to the most recent American Religious Identification Survey, which indicates that since 1990, individuals claiming to be Christians in the United States have decreased by 10 percentage points from 86% to 76%. The article lays out the reasons for a declining Christianity, not only in the United States, but throughout the world.¹

Of course, the survey is not the only indicator of Christianity's decline: dwindling resources, waning memberships, dilapidated Church buildings, aging congregants. The survey is really no surprise. It merely provides empirical evidence for what has appeared to be true for the last twenty years: Christian faith is slowly, but surely being purged by the world. That's what happens to weeds, right?

Weeds are pulled from those places in which they are not wanted. We put on the gardening gloves, we take out the weed eaters, we spray pesticides. Weeds are a nuisance, they are pests, they are problem. And problems need to be purged.

But Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like an overgrown weed. The kingdom of God is a problem?

¹ Meacham, Jon. "The End of Christian America." *Newsweek*. April 13, 2009.

There is a part of me that can't blame the world for seeing Christianity as a problem....as a sort of pesky weed. Those who have spoken for Christianity during the last twenty years have made our faith about one particular set of political or social issues, making our religion more divisive than reconciling. We as the church have assumed that people would just flock to our congregations without doing evangelism or mission.

Pastors have not done well in making Christianity relevant to our congregants and communities in our preaching and teaching. Many of us, as individuals, have remained stagnant in our relationship with God, not nurturing that relationship with prayer, Bible Study, and ministry. Overall, Christianity has become more about maintenance than it has mission. Sometimes it seems as if we have caused more problems than solutions. We have looked like a weed at times.

Although, I cannot help but wonder if the world looks upon Christianity as a sort of weed that needs purging because deep down we, as Christians, feel the same way about our faith....just for different reasons. Our faith would really become a problem if we allowed Jesus to completely take over our lives like a weed, right?

We don't really want to love our neighbor *all the time*. We don't, deep down, really want to help those who are less fortunate than us, those who are different from us, because it's uncomfortable and inconvenient. If we are honest, we don't believe *we can truly love our enemy*. We can only give so much of our time, energy, and resources to the church.

No, more often than not, we do just enough in order that we still feel like we have things under control. We allow the weeds of the kingdom to grow just enough that they might become a nuisance, but then we cut them out so that they certainly not become a problem.

In fact, don't we look at those individuals in whom the kingdom has really taken over like a weed, grown into the size of a giant bush, and label them the exception? We point fingers at them and call them things like zealots and fanatics.

We are constantly purging the weeds in our lives. We continually kill the seeds of the kingdom that are sown, before they even germinate. Actually, we struggle to allow ourselves to ever become fertile soil so that the kingdom can be planted in our hearts.

John Dominic Crossan says it like this, "The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within

cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like."²

Perhaps the kingdom is not growing in the world because, if we are honest, we don't really want the kingdom to grow in our own lives. We don't like weeds. They tend to infest, to take over, to become a nuisance and even a problem. It's easier just to purge them, to get rid of them.

But Jesus says let them grow into the size of a bush. In fact, let that bush grow large enough that birds can come and nest in its branches.

In doing some research this week on weeds, I found that there are some weeds that are actually beneficial both to the soil and the domestic crop with which it may be growing. An example of this is pigweeds in a heavy-soil potato field, the weeds spaced far enough apart to permit strong root development without crowding the potatoes; or a combination of pigweeds and lamb's quarter and sow thistles, scattered thinly in a tomato garden or an onion patch -- or even in a cornfield. In such cases the weeds can become valuable "mother weeds" instead of pests.

Jesus knew that not all weeds are the same, not all weeds are bad. In fact, if you remember, Jesus tells another parable about weeds and wheat. A farmer plants some wheat and an enemy sows weeds among the wheat. The farmhand asks his master if he wants him to pull the weeds and the Master says, "Leave the weeds alone." Perhaps that is what Jesus is again telling us today. Leave the weeds alone.

There is an old story about a man who bought a house with an overgrown garden. The weeds had long since taken over the garden and it was a mess. But slowly the man began to clear the weeds, till the soil and plant the seeds. Finally, he had made it into a showcase garden.

One day the minister came to visit, and when he saw the beautiful flowers and plants, he observed, "Well, friend, you and God have done a marvelous job on this garden." To which the homeowner replied, "You should have seen it when God had it by himself."³

When weeds of forgiveness begin to take root in the field of your heart, allow them to take over your life and dictate your actions. When weeds of grace are sown in the soil of your soul, allow them to grow into plants large enough for the world to see. When weeds of love are planted in the garden of your spirit, allow them to grow out of control and to become a problem for you.

² Dominic-Crossan, John. "The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant." Harper One. 1993.

³ <http://home.roadrunner.com/~lyndale/Pentecost%202B,%202009.htm>

That is what Jesus is telling us in this parable today. The kingdom of God should take over your life in such a way that it not only becomes a nuisance, but that it turns into a real problem, to the point that it dictates everything you do. The Kingdom of God *is* like an overgrown weed.

My grandfather is a purple heart from World War II. He spent most of his time in the South Pacific and it was at the battle of Leyte that he was shot and barely survived. As result of the war, my grandfather spent most of his life hating the Japanese.

This sweet spirited, good man would refer to the Japanese as nips. He refused to eat Asian food. Never considered buying a Japanese made car. Deep down within his soul, he carried around with him a prejudice against those he battled during the war.

About six months ago, a Japanese reporter contacted my grandfather about doing an interview for a documentary that was being created about survivors from the war. Surprisingly, my grandfather agreed and the reporter came to his home for the interview.

For the better part of an hour, the reporter spent her time trying to draw out my grandfather's feelings about the war--if he had feelings of guilt, if he harbored feelings of resentment, if he still held on to old stereotypes and prejudices.

Finally, the interviewer asked, "You no longer seem to carry with you many of the ill feelings you once held of the Japanese. It is almost like you have found forgiveness and reconciliation. How did you do this?" My grandfather simply said, "I finally allowed Jesus Christ to take over my life."

Weeds are a nuisance. They are problem. It's just easier to purge weeds so we don't have to deal with them, so they don't end up taking over or becoming out of control. But Jesus says, "the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that is sown and grows into a bush large enough for birds to nest in its branches." Jesus says, "Let the weeds grow."

Amen.