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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Flourishing

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: Mark 4:26-34

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🎵 God is still speaking,

Once there was an emperor in the Far East who was growing old and knew it was coming time to choose his successor. Instead of choosing one of his assistants or one of his own children, he decided to do something different.

He called all the young people in the kingdom together one day. He said, "It has come time for me to step down and to choose the next emperor. I have decided to choose one of you." The kids were shocked! But the emperor continued. "I am going to give each one of you a seed today. One seed. It is a very special seed. I want you to go home, plant the seed, water it and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from this one seed. I will then judge the plants that you bring to me, and the one I choose will be the next emperor of the kingdom!"

There was one boy named Ling who was there that day and he, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his mother the whole story. She helped him get a pot and some planting soil, and he planted the seed and watered it carefully. Every day he would water it and watch to see if it had grown.

After about three weeks, some of the other youths began to talk about their seeds and the plants that were beginning to grow. Ling kept going home and checking his seed, but nothing ever grew. Three weeks, four weeks, five weeks went by. Still nothing.

By now others were talking about their plants but Ling didn't have a plant, and he felt like a failure. Six months went by, still nothing in Ling's pot. He just knew he had killed his seed. Everyone else had trees and tall plants, but he had nothing. Ling didn't say anything to his friends, however. He just kept waiting for his seed to grow.

A year finally went by and all the youths of the kingdom brought their plants to the emperor for inspection. Ling told his mother that he wasn't going to take an empty pot. But she encouraged him to go, and to take his pot, and to be honest about what happened. Ling felt sick to his stomach, but he knew his mother was right. He took his empty pot to the palace.

When Ling arrived, he was amazed at the variety of plants grown by all the other youths. They were beautiful, in all shapes and sizes. Ling put his empty pot on the floor and many of the other kids laughed at him. A few felt sorry for him and just said, "Hey, nice try."

When the emperor arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted the young people. Ling just tried to hide in the back. "My, what great plants, trees and flowers you have grown," said the emperor. "Today, one of you will be appointed the next emperor!"

All of a sudden, the emperor spotted Ling at the back of the room with his empty pot. He ordered his guards to bring him to the front. Ling was terrified. "The emperor knows I'm a failure! Maybe he will have me killed!"

When Ling got to the front, the Emperor asked his name. "My name is Ling," he replied. All the kids were laughing and making fun of him. The emperor asked everyone to quiet down. He looked at Ling, and then announced to the crowd, "Behold your new emperor! His name is Ling!" Ling couldn't believe it. Ling couldn't even grow his seed. How could he be the new emperor?

Then the emperor said, “One year ago today, I gave everyone here a seed. I told you to take the seed, plant it, water it, and bring it back to me today. But I gave you all boiled seeds which would not grow. All of you, except Ling, have brought me trees and plants and flowers. When you found that the seed would not grow, you substituted another seed for the one I gave you. Ling was the only one with the courage and honesty to bring me a pot with my seed in it. Therefore, he is the one who will be the new emperor!”<sup>1</sup>

Once there was a man named Jesus who knew his time on this earth was ending and he told a story. In fact, the story lived on long past his death. The people who had heard about Jesus and who had followed Jesus continued to tell the story. The story was a story of hope for them, so they told it often. They told it in as many ways that they could, using as many images as they could. Some called it a Kingdom, some a Realm. Some spoke of a time when God would rule the Empire, a Dominion of God, a new social order, a time when God would be in all, through all, for all, on earth as it is in heaven, no separation. “The culture of God”.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus began the story like others had before him, centuries before, generations of faithful Jews before him. Jesus started the story like the prophet Ezekiel, the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter. All Jesus’ listeners leaned in closer. I know this one. “God says I will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar. I will plant it myself on the mountain height. It will be noble: every kind of bird will nest in it. It will flourish.” Go, Jesus, go, Jesus. Tell it like it is. Big, strong, mighty, beat those enemies down. Wait, what’s this? They heard him go on, saying, “The culture of God is like a mustard seed, a shrub, lantana, kudzu, a weed gone mad. The culture of God is at its greatest when it flourishes and gives shelter to the most people possible, not when power is taken by a few.”

What was this?

Could Jesus be warning them that by following Jesus they weren’t joining the biggest tree on the highest mountain?

Was Jesus saying to them that being part of this movement is not about standing back and admiring the tree in whose branches you have made your home?

Was Jesus saying that his followers were supposed to be less like a mighty cedar and more like an undesirable nuisance, a noxious, even dangerous, weed?<sup>3</sup> Mustard? Who wants to be like mustard?

Flourishing. A verb. From Middle English. Can you give me the definition please? Wasn’t that Scripps Spelling Bee amazing to watch?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jokesnjokes.net/funny.jokes.amusing.humor.laugh/newsletters/inspire0917.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.laughingbird.net/ComingWeeks.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.laughingbird.net/ComingWeeks.html>

Flourishing, to grow luxuriantly, to thrive, to prosper, to reach a height of development or influence, to make bold and sweeping gestures.<sup>4</sup>

I don't use the word *flourishing* very often, do you? Maybe we should start. The culture of God is flourishing in this church and in this world in ways seen and unseen.

We are invited to trust in God's ongoing act of flourishing. We delight at this growth flourishing in and among us.

All week I have been receiving Twitters about senior high work camp from Pastor Ted: I'm on top of the World: Pike's Peak, Colorado. Every bone aches after scraping a cabin for seven hours. I should have remained a pastoral counselor.

God is good all the time! Right?

Day 5, over the hump day.

They shoot horses don't they?

Kids are connecting. Sharing is deep.

Is this flourishing?

All this week we have hosted Arts Camp: 78 kids. 52 from outside our congregation. Dana Bender and team worked very hard and did a fabulous job. Dana worked so hard she decided to go right on and be Dean of UCC Junior Camp in Prescott all week. One day, a mom passed me on her way out and said, "I am so grateful for your church." Flourishing.

While I was at that Church Multiplication event two weeks ago, a gathering to look at congregations starting new congregations, I pondered the question, "What if in five years our church was so well known that we couldn't fit everyone in?" We're not the biggest cedar in the Valley. But we may be the most obnoxious weed, a community trying to make a new social order flourish, providing shelter to the greatest number, rather than power to a few.

Each week, every week, I listen to extraordinary stories: of hardship and of joy. I listen to families struggling to rub two nickels together, already way past losing their job and their house. I listen to people struggling to hold a family together, making decisions about life and death, and quality of life and living with quality. I listen with people who have incredible faith and hope and who are desperately seeking a place to share that, beyond a twitter and a tweet.

By listening to those stories, I am reminded that the joke is on me if I think I have made any of those seeds grow.

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<sup>4</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary

Don't misunderstand me. I know all the strategies to make a church grow. I taught them. We are living them out now. At the same time, I know that if the kingdom of God, the culture of God, the reign of God could be bottled, I would have made a fortune by now. God cannot be predicted. And ministry would be easy if you didn't have to deal with people. While we long for numerical growth and spiritual growth and financial growth and mission growth, our biggest job, our continuous job, our call from our baptism to our coming home to God is to take the seed, plant it, water it, nurture it, like Ling the Emperor, with integrity. Being church, being disciples, being mustard, being shelter is not a spectator sport.

It is speaking on behalf of the poor and the elderly and the families and the ones with disabilities when it comes to state budgets. It is giving money, even when we think we do not have enough money, to support the church.

It is Cheese Boats for Nicaragua, investing in ministry way outside of our comfort zone. It is working toward a new service of worship for people who have never been in a church before or not for a very long time.

It is, of all things, a sack race at a Fourth of July party where people say, "Tell me about this church. I've driven past it for decades. You say I'd be welcome here?"

When we say families are welcome, we mean everybody's family.

As we move into the Season after Pentecost, we remember that burning fire, God's Spirit, that sends us where we need to be and give us the gifts, each and every one of us, to flourish. The culture of God grows, and we don't know exactly what caused the growth. All we can do is rejoice in it.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus Christ, was not born to Joseph and Mary Christ. Jesus the Christ, the Messiah in Hebrew, in Greek the Christ, the predicted one, the anointed one, the one who would reestablish God's throne and rule and culture of wholeness: this Jesus never did raise an army, never did drive the Romans out of the Promised Land, never did establish Israel as a sovereign state.

Instead he got crucified. He suffered. He was murdered. But the seeds of a new way of living had been planted. Not with violence, but with shelter. Not with power, but with love. Not with control over, but from welcome within. The first church thrived, flourished, grew in the time of pain and hardship. Seems like it is still a time of pain and hardship. Some say the pain may get worse before it gets better. If it does, when it does, it is a time to be God's culture, love, compassion, open doors, giving. Help me sow those seeds. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.progressivetheology.org/SNT/SNT-2006.06.18.html>