Some of you have seen the sunflower

outside the office door here at Zion.

When it first sprang up,

I thought it was a weed and almost pulled it up,

but curiosity at its fast growth made me wait.

It wasn't long before we had a tall, beautiful sunflower

atop a strong, straight stalk.

I'm guessing that a bird dropped a seed there,

though maybe one of you planted it.

It's an unlikely place for a sunflower to grow,

in the rocks next to a bed of hostas

and it's that unlikeliness

that has made it so fun to watch

grow and bloom this summer. Nature always has a way of surprising and delighting us. It can take something like a single sunflower seed and cause it to give birth to a stately, impressive flower. There is something inspiring in that kind of miracle of nature.

I have heard quite a few sermons on this series of parables in Matthew. I know you have, too. Most of them have focused on how God can take something small and insignificant and do great things with it. Just look at little old you and me, we hear, and imagine God making something good of us and our small churches. I have preached this message, too, and it's not bad theology. God does indeed have a role for each of us to play in God's unfolding kingdom. Think of the widow and her two coins or David before he was king. God gives us each the potential to be like the majestic sunflower, whether we are where we are on purpose or by accident. With God's nurture, each one of us can grow into who God created us to be.

That message would be all well and good if Jesus were talking about a sunflower. Instead, Jesus talks to the crowds about a different kind of species, about a mustard seed that someone sowed in a field. When it is grown, Jesus says, it grows into a tall, showy tree. Here we have an image of fertile soil, the potential of a small seed and God's hand watering and growing that seed until it grows so high and sturdy that it safely houses the birds of the air. Sounds good, doesn't it? That's the same kind of message I've always heard about this parable, one that always seems impressive because of the tiny size of the mustard seed.

But what if there is another layer to what Jesus is saying, one that digs a little deeper into the fullness of Jesus' parable? It turns out that a mustard plant grows quickly but it doesn't grow into a tall tree. Instead, the mustard is more of a shrub, growing sideways and spreading so it is bigger around than it is tall. It's unlikely that a bird would feel safe in its branches so close to the ground, let alone make a nest in it. Mustard plants are like kudzu; it only takes a small plant to take over an entire area like a field or a hillside. In biblical times and now, farmers have to be careful about the ways they grow mustard; they have to dedicate an area for it and watch for plants that spring up where they are not wanted.

Mustard plants are nutritious – their leaves can be eaten and their seeds ground into a condiment. Mustard plants also are insidious,, weed-like, invasive, uncontrollable and undesirable. Jesus knows this, of course, and so do his listeners. If he wants to make a point about the soaring, dramatic kingdom of God he could use the familiar image of a cedar tree, which also grows from a relatively small seed. It is possible, maybe even likely, that Jesus is using irony here to make his point. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, Jesus says, yielding not a tall regal tree, but an unwelcome, pernicious nuisance. The seed may be small but it grows quickly and it is hard for any farmer to control. Its roots take hold and spread underground, where no one can see them until the plant grows wider and its branches more sturdy. This is how Jesus says the kingdom of God works in our world: showing up where it is not wanted, challenging the status quo, choking out all that threatens it, unstoppable by those in power.

What if Jesus' parable has more than one meaning? What if it does have to do with Jesus taking something small and insignificant and growing it into something substantial and strong? What if you and I become workers in God's kingdom because of the nurture of our Lord? What if all this is not an end in itself, but part of something larger and more sinister? Whoa. Not what you signed on for? Me, neither. But it's what God has had in mind for us and for God's church from the very beginning. For God knows there is a better way than my way and yours. There is a better way for our church, for our institiutions, for our government, for all the governmentsof the world. Jesus is bringing life-altering change to us all and there is nothing we can do about it. His kingdom, ushered into this world in the arms of a teenage mother and a humble carpenter, has grown so strong that it vies with any earthly power that takes him on, reducing them all to weeds for the burn pile.

This better way is the way of hope, of peace, of justice. The insidious power of Jesus is threatening the powers in this world, in our church, in our souls, powers that reap despair and conflict.

All the power of Jesus is standing up to the status quo, challenging systems that punish the poor for their poverty, the sick for their illness, their defenceless for their vulnerability. Jesus is provoking you and me, warning us that it is the ways in which we feel most comfortable that he will challenge and provoke us, all for the sake of the gospel.

You and I are in this world, members of the body of Christ and citizens of the world for a reason: to love God and to love our neighbors. We are not here to build walls around ourselves with our possessions, to make our own little kingdoms where we feel secure and our fortresses are comfortable and impenetrable. As disciples of an untamable Lord, you and I offer all that we have and all that we are to Jesus, allowing him to strip away all that keeps us from devotion to him and our neighbors. In so doing, we give ourselves over to the unexpected, wild and invasive power of Jesus. We live each day in awe of our Lord's mighty power and we work to bring it to those who, in the words of David Lose, “.. are perishing – whether by illness or disappointment or poverty or dissatisfaction with the inequities of the world or spiritual discontent – Jesus’ promises are still good news, indeed the best news we’ve heard and worth sacrificing all to embrace.”

Jesus' promises are being fulfilled right here, right now. When you and I help someone in poverty, then fight unjust systems that keep them and their children and their children's children in poverty's grip, Jesus is keeping his promise to the world. Every time we pray for an end to hunger and feed the hungry among us, Jesus' promise is coming to fruition. Whenever we let the words of Jesus penetrate our thick skulls and hearts, Jesus' kingdom blooms within us and we become productive workers in Jesus' field.

The parable of the mustard seed is no sweet lullaby whose music lulls us to comfortable and safe slumber., Rather, this parable and the others with it, are strange, challenging and uncomfortable, calling us to wake from our sleep, follow the example of our Lord and serve him by facing all that threatens our neighbor's safety and peace, facing it as tenaciously, fiercely and invasively as a mustard shrub in a farmer's field.

Amen.

*Pentecost 8A*

*July 30, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutherran Parish*

*Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52*