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The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

In the Spirit of Father's Day I wanted to share a joke with you that my Father shared with me. But, be patient, because like all Dad jokes, it's long, and requires a bit of a discerning ear. Here we go. One evening, after spending a long day of work on earth, God approached St. Francis. "Frank... You know all about gardens and nature. What in my name is going on down there on earth? What happened to all the dandelions, violets, milkweeds and stuff I started eons ago? I had created a perfect no-maintenance garden plan. With plants that will grow in any form of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. Not to mention their long lasting blooms and nectar which supplies butterflies, honey bees and flocks of songbirds with sustenance for months on end. I expected to see a vast garden of colors by now and a wide array of pollinators. But, all I see are little green rectangles everywhere." St. Francis replied. "Well, Lord, It's the tribes, the Suburbanites, who settled there. They started calling your flowers 'weeds', going to great lengths to kill and replace them with grass." "Grass?" God interjected, "But, grass is so boring. It's not colorful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds, or bees; only grubs and sod worms. Not to mention, it's sensitive to temperatures. Do these Suburbanites really want all that grass growing there?" St. Francis replied, "Apparently so, Lord. They work tirelessly to grow it and keep it green. Each spring they fertilize the grass and poison intruding plants." God responded, "Well, the spring rains and warm weather certainly speed the growth of grass. That must make the Suburbanites happy." "You would think, but actually no." replied St. Francis, "As soon as it grows a little, they cut it back, sometimes twice a week." "They cut it?" God retorted, "Do they bale it like hay?" "Not exactly," St. Francis replied. "Most of them rake it up and put it in bags." Even more confused, God inquired, "Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?" Hesitantly St. Francis responded, "Uh no, Lord, just the opposite. They pay to have it thrown away." Becoming increasingly confused, on the verge of frustration, God asked, "Now, let me get this straight. They fertilize grass so it will grow. And, when it does grow, they cut it and pay someone else to throw it away?" "Yes, Lord," St. Francis replied.

"Well then," God went on, "these Suburbanites must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. Slowing down the growth and saving them a lot of work." "You aren't going to believe this, Lord." St. Francis answered him, "But, when the grass stops growing as fast, they drag out hoses and pay more money to water it, so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it." God was astounded, "What nonsense. At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stroke of genius, if I do say so myself. As they grow leaves in the spring and provide beauty and shade in the summer, and then fall to the ground in the Autumn creating a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil, and protect the plants in the winter. All part of the circle of life." St. Francis wasn't sure he should respond, but not wanting to tell a lie to God he said, "You better sit down, Lord. The Suburbanites have drawn their own circle of life. As soon as the leaves fall, they rake them into piles and again pay to have them hauled away." "No!?" God responded, "How do they protect the shrubs and tree roots in the winter, or keep the soil moist and loose?" "Well," replied St. Francis, "after throwing away the leaves, they buy mulch, haul it back to their homes and spread it around in place of the leaves." "Where do they get the mulch," God inquired. "From ground up trees they cut down." On the verge of going ballistic God responded, "Enough! I don't want to hear about it anymore. St. Catherine, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have you chosen for us tonight?" St. Catherine replied " 'Dumb and Dumber', Lord. It's a story about..."

God stopped her, “ Never mind Catherine, I think I just heard the whole story from St. Francis.”

Today, in our Gospel from Mark, we hear the famous parables of the seeds, as Jesus tries to give us a glimpse of what the kingdom of heaven is like. Using examples of the passive farmer, who plants a seed, goes to sleep, and wakes up to an abundant crop. Or the mustard seed, a tiny grain that grows up to be a wildly expansive and immensely invasive bush (some spreading as far as 20 feet, and as high as 30). But, what do a passive farmer, a fertile crop, or an intrusive shrub have to do with the kingdom of heaven? That elusive paradise that we hope to achieve sometime in our future as we work to earn our entry into its pearly gates here and now?

Maybe that is exactly it, though. Just like the joke of God and St. Francis, or Jesus’ parables about seeds. Too often we try to take things into our own hands, striving to achieve what we have defined as the status quo, only to get in our own way, and inadvertently disconnect ourselves from our creator and sometimes from creation itself? It’s not to say that striving, working, or even fitting in are bad things (don’t get me wrong, I spent yesterday morning laying ground cover so I can haul in my own mulch), but there is a time and place for everything. And so often, it would seem, we end up spinning our wheels, and missing out on the beauty and wonder of this magnificent world. Or the simple fact that God is already working in us, through us, and all around us, begging us to stop, to slow down, and to notice that Divine presence and work and glory. As Jesus points out today, the kingdom of heaven is not some far off place, it is not the striving for what we have defined as perfection, it is not even a thing that needs to be strived for. Because, it is already inside each and everyone of us, and all around. Like a seed, growing, blooming, and trying to invade our very lives. All we have to do, as Jesus tells us, is slow down, take time to look around, to acknowledge the heavenly kingdom's very presence within ourselves and one another. So that when the harvest has come to fruition, we can reap the bounty and share it with the world.

I used to think the kingdom of heaven was this pie in the sky dream, of unity, harmony, and ultimate perfection. But, based on our passage from Mark and the words from Jesus, It would seem to me that the kingdom of heaven is much more like the dandelions, milkweed, or virginia creeper we so desperately seek to destroy in our suburbanite yards. It’s pesky and it appears where it is not wanted, or it is completely ignored when it’s found exactly where we would expect to see its vibrant and glorious blooms. It is readily available, accessible, and so it is almost always overlooked. Which makes me wonder if heaven is less like pearly gates and golden streets, and more like Dr. Martin Luther King’s point, in that infamous quote the arc of the moral universe, which is long, but bends towards justice. My friends, the kingdom of heaven is like that arc, or like that dandelion, it will always be present, it will always be achievable, and it will always be calling us to continue to notice and grasp hold of its presence, gift, and grace. And so I pray that we may find a bit of the kingdom of heaven within the imperfections of life and the messiness of this world. Making space and room to experience the beauty of God’s kingdom in the wild of nature, in the messiness of relationships, and even in the perceived flaws of this life.