**June 13 Sermon Mark 4:26-34 3rd Sunday after Pentecost Year B.**

Hello Virginia Synod siblings! I’m Pastor Ingrid Chenoweth of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Front Royal. This is the third Sunday after Pentecost, year B, and a beautiful June day here in the Outer Banks where I’ve been traveling with my family.

As we’ve been visiting different places, I’ve noticed a few groups of people planning for weddings. June is of course the most popular month for weddings. Is there a wedding taking place in your congregation, or among your family and friends this month?

A wedding is such a joyful occastion, but if you are involved in planning a wedding, my prayers are with you! There is so much preparation involved in even a simple wedding. Those who are helping with the planning have to choose a venue, create a guest list, plan the service and all the details of the reception and the food served, send out invitations, decide who’s in the bridal party and what they will wear, and so much more. All of that takes months of careful planning. If you made a list of all the people involved in making a wedding happen, including those involved in food preparation, growing and selling and arranging the flowers, it would end up including hundreds of names.

But coming as a guest to a wedding, you don’t see all of those thousands of hours of work, the hundreds of phone calls, the vast network of human connections that made the event possible. All of that is hidden, if you’re a wedding guest.

In the same way, the growth of the kingdom of God happens in ways that are hidden to us. Jesus compares God’s work to the growth of a vigorous, invasive mustard plant from a tiny seed. The Spirit’s work of bringing new life and providing for all of God’s creatures, including you and me, happens in hidden ways.

That hiddenness means that it can be hard for us to trust that God is at work. When we’re in pain or afraid, we look around for evidence that God still loves us, is still caring for us, but we don’t always see God’s hidden action. And yet the Holy Spirit’s work continues, creating growth, nourishing our souls, making the connections needed for the answering of prayers.

Whenever I pray with someone who’s about to undergo a medical procedure, I pray (with the patient if possible) well in advance for God to be at work laying the foundation for that procedure to go well. For God to be at work in the lives of those who will be providing medical care, to protect the patient from infection, to help protect the patient’s family during that time so that they can just focus on healing.

And of course when we pray those things, we’re actually just responding to the Holy Spirit’s prompting. When we pray something, we know God thought of it first. As Paul says in Romans 8, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that same Spirit intercedes for us. Theologian and writer Ruth Burrows writes that prayer “is not primarily something we are doing to God, [or] something we are giving to God, but what God is doing for us.”

God is always at work on our behalf, and on behalf of all God’s creatures. Sometimes in ways that are easy to see, but most of the time in hidden ways. So if you cannot see God’s work, don’t worry. Don’t be afraid. The Spirit is at work for and in you nonetheless.

Remember the other time Jesus mentions a mustard seed? Luke records Jesus as saying, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Luke 17:6). The Greek word here for “if” means that Jesus is saying we DO have that faith. Jesus is basically saying, if you have that faith and I know you do! His words are words of encouragement. You DO have faith, and even though it may just be tiny like a mustard seed it’s incredibly powerful. Your faith is like a tiny pellet of uranium, at about half and inch by half an inch, which generates as much energy as or a ton of coal or 17,000 cubic feet of natural gas. And of course since your grain of faith is connected the vast and hidden work of God it’s even more powerful than that.

Now more than ever we need to hear these words of hope. A recent study cited in the NYT on Feb. 15th said that young people in the U.S. are suffering from an unprecedented wave of despair. The isolation and economic devastation of Covid, climate change, economic inequality, and political division are making it harder than ever for young people to have hope for the future.

But all around, there is evidence of God’s work. All around, the Spirit is bringing new awareness and new life, and this hidden work is becoming visible. Theologian Richard Rohr quotes Choctaw elder and Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston, who shares his reasons for hope. Bishop Charleston writes:

The signs are all around us. We can see them springing up like wildflowers after the prairie rain. People who had fallen asleep are waking up. People who had been content to watch are wanting to join. People who never said a word are speaking out. The tipping point of faith is the threshold of spiritual energy, where what we believe becomes what we do. When that power is released, there is no stopping it, for love is a force that cannot be contained. Look and see the thousands of new faces gathering from every direction. There is the sign of hope for which you have been waiting. . . .

Sometimes, in this troubled world of ours, we forget that love is all around us. We imagine the worst of other people and withdraw into our own shells. But try this simple test: Stand still in any crowded place and watch the people around you. Within a very short time, you will begin to see love, and you will see it over and over and over. A young mother talking to her child, a couple laughing together as they walk by, an older man holding the door for a stranger—small signs of love are everywhere. The more you look, the more you will see. Love is literally everywhere. We are surrounded by love.

Andrew DeVries told his story of hope to Story Corps in 2009. He had been in a motorcycle accident, and had shattered his leg. He was devastated to learn that he would probably lose his leg; his doctors had begun to prepare him for what looked like an inevitable amputation. But one of his hospitalists came in and asked him a question that seemed ridiculous: “What kind of golf ball do you play?” Andrew tells how that question changed his life; he says:

As I’m thinking about my life without a leg, and it would be removed mid-thigh, talking about golf balls seemed almost idiotic, but I did respond that the kind of golf ball I play was a Titleist Pro V1. I woke up in the morning and there were flowers around my room and right in the middle of those flowers was a yellow twelve-pack of Titleist Pro V1. That hospitalist, Sarah, had purchased those for me, and Sarah brought me hope. She had helped me stop thinking about how sorry I should feel for myself and she brought a glimmer of hope... I woke up in recovery and I had ten toes. There was a little bit of blood flow and they decided not to take the leg. And when I was to be released, Sarah came in that day to wheel me from my room to the ambulance. And she and I had developed a very close doctor-patient relationship and Sarah shared with me that she had lost her father and she asked me to do her a favor. She said, ’I’d like you to walk me down the aisle.’ And I said ’Sarah, you don’t have a boyfriend.’

She said, ’Some day I will.’

I started to think, I’m going to this next hospital knowing that I might not get out of a wheelchair, and she [has] asked me to walk her down the aisle. Now this accident took place seven years ago…. And this summer I got an email from her, saying: ’I have a boyfriend. Will you come?’ And I had the privilege of walking, rather that wheel-chairing, walking Sarah down the aisle.

Yellow golf balls. Mustard seeds of hope. May God be with you and yours, and may the Spirit give you eyes to see God’s hidden work. Amen.