

“Give Me Some Shade”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 4, Proper 6, Lectionary 11

Texts: Mark 4:26–34, Ezekiel 17:22–24, 2 Corinthians 5:6–17

Preached: June 17, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, who is making a new creation, and from our Lord Jesus Christ.
AMEN

This heat is really something, isn't it? Yesterday afternoon we went to a backyard graduation party for a young woman in our family. Their house is right alongside a little branch of the Des Plaines river, so as you enter their yard, there's this beautiful, shady side yard, covered over by tree branches, with water flowing below in the little ravine. When we arrived, there were all kinds of people huddled in that shady area—partly because that's where the food and drink was laid out, but also because it was pleasant there. We said our hellos, and loaded our plates. Tom went ahead to the back yard to get seats for us at the tables arranged there. I came around the corner and discovered that, instead of choosing seats under the tents our hosts had set up all around the perimeter under the shade trees, Tom had plopped himself down and saved me a seat at a table that was in the full, blazing sun...with my chair facing the sun. Within minutes, my shirt was wringing wet with sweat, and I was thinking of nothing more than finishing my food and getting back under those big shady trees where I could find some cooler air, some shelter from the burning heat. I am a shade lover. I lived for two years in the Arizona desert, and the thing I hated most was that there were no trees, no shade. I need shade.

So on this hot day, it's refreshing to hear scriptures full of shade trees. We hear about sheltering branches, lush, fruit-bearing branches, cedars planted for the sole purpose of providing shade, or simply overgrown mustard bushes in the middle of a barren field, whose main usefulness is in the fact that birds of all kinds can come and find respite from the burning Middle Eastern desert sun that beats down on their backs as they soar through the air seeking food and drink. Ah, shade! Picture it for a moment. Imagine yourself out under this sun, oppressive heat weakening you as you labor and trudge along, wringing the very moisture of your bones out of you, throat parching and drying, brow beaded with sweat, your whole body crying out for relief. And now picture standing before you a towering tree, branches spread, cool, cool shade under its shelter, lush green grass under those boughs. You stagger toward it, casting yourself down on that cool grass, protected by that refreshing shade.

That, dear people, is what Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like: shade. Shade under a tree, where all the birds of the air can come and rest. That, dear friends, is what God announces that this new creation will be like: a shade tree, planted, tended, and nurtured by God's own self high up on a mountain, grown from a spindly transplant so that everyone can spot it, even from a distance, and can come to find rest and refuge. The Kingdom of God is a shade tree. If there ain't any shade, it ain't the Kingdom of God.

So when I saw the photos this week of Casa Padre, “Father House”—an ironic name, on this Fathers' Day—the abandoned Walmart converted into a detention center for immigrant children on the Texas border, one of the first things I noticed was the empty expanse of asphalt surrounding it, and the barren South Texas landscape of scrubby plants eking out a hardscrabble life in the dusty, dry soil. No shade in sight. It is here, as well as in some 100 other detention centers scattered along our borders, that the children who tried to enter this country are being housed after being separated from their parents—even when those families are legitimately allowed by our laws to request asylum. Currently, more than 11,000 children are in the custody of the U.S. government. Some are children who attempted to cross the border unaccompanied, but most have been separated from their families by our government authorities. The pace of separations has increased so dramatically that the Administration is now talking about housing up to 5,000 more children in tents in the Southwestern desert...ah, but they're air-conditioned tents.

The stories are heartwrenching. An attorney described one young mother whose baby was taken literally from her breast as she nursed him. Reports have come to our ears of parents being told that their children were being taken so they could be given showers, and the parents waited hours for their return, only to realize that their children were not coming back to them. The historical echoes of that are chilling.

Dr. Colleen Kraft, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, visited one small shelter along the Texas border, where she saw a two-year-old girl lying on the floor, screaming and pounding her fists. This baby had been taken from her mother the previous day as part of the Administration's zero tolerance policy for immigrant families caught trying to cross the border. A shelter worker attempted to calm the toddler by offering

her books and toys, but her strategy was not working. When asked why she wasn't picking the child up, she admitted that the workers had been forbidden to touch, hold, or pick up the children, even to comfort them.

The detention centers are being run by private contractors in many cases. One organization, Southwest Key, has received more than \$1 billion since 2014 to run their network of centers, and the owner and his wife pocketed \$1.5 million last year as their own salaries. This has been going on for a few years now, while we ignored it, and now with the change in policy that the Administration implemented a couple of months ago, the pace of separations is accelerating. There's the additional problem that the government has lost track of some 1500 unaccompanied minors who were placed into foster care after being detained, and some of them have been found working in slave-like conditions in sweatshops and on farms, while others are the victims of sex trafficking.

Now, I know that some of you are saying to yourselves, "Pastor, don't be so political! I hear enough of this horror show on TV and the Internet, I don't want to come to church and hear the ugliness and division here, as well." And normally I would not be this explicit in my preaching. I tend to understand the Good News as a seed that grows slowly, and so my usual tendency is to plant Good News seeds and let them mature and bear fruit as we come to understand the Kingdom principles better and better, allowing them to take gentle root in us. But sisters and brothers, when children are being wrenched from the arms of their parents, we must act. Very real harm is being done to the least of these, right now, in your name. And when the Attorney General of the United States criticizes Christian bishops and leaders for speaking out against these policies by twisting scripture to say that we cannot oppose unjust laws, this is not a political issue, this is a Kingdom of God issue.

Attorney General Sessions cited Romans 13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." He did not cite Romans 12, however: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good ... Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all ... If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

And that is where we hear the Good News. When we are faced with evil, we are with God's help to overcome it by doing good. You and I are trees planted to provide shade for weary, thirsty people. We are branches of the True Vine so that our leaves can shelter the "birds of the air of every kind." Why? Because that is what the Kingdom of God is like: shade for the weary and the stumbling, shelter for those seeking to escape the burning sun of midday, hope for those dying of thirst. If there ain't any shade, it ain't the Kingdom of God.

Am I saying that we shouldn't have immigration laws, or that we shouldn't control our borders? No. There's a legitimate place for an orderly process of immigration. Nor am I trying to equate the U.S. with the Kingdom of God, even though across our history those in power have tried to exploit that notion when it suited their purposes. You and I as followers of Jesus live as citizens of two kingdoms, and we must be careful not to confuse the two. America is not the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God is not America. Nowhere does scripture demand that we simply shut up and accept unjust laws. But we cannot achieve that goal by doing evil, and most certainly not by doing evil to children. We must demand that our leaders find another way.

If our political leaders want to talk about what is biblical, Scripture instructs us over and over again that God will not hold blameless those who mistreat the immigrant living among us. In Torah, the commandment to love and care for the immigrant is given more often than any other commandment—36 times. The prophets of Israel over and over again make the connection between Israel's suffering and their failure to treat kindly the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant living in the land, pointing out that providing loving support for these groups is the essence of living a righteous life, a life pleasing to God. Why? Because those are the people God values, the lowly ones whom God lifts up. Why? "Because you were once strangers in Egypt." To love the immigrant in our land, to treat them as neighbor, to love them as we love ourselves, is to act the way God acts.

The Spirit of God works in us, plants us, tends us, nurtures us, to become shade trees, welcoming the birds of the air to come and find rest, to find coolness in the shade. And notice that the scripture is explicit that birds of every kind are welcome. We're called to live our lives in the world in ways that offer shade to those who need to escape the heat. We're called to offer hospitality and welcome, and we're called to provide safety for those at risk. We are called to participate in this new creation, this Kingdom of God, where all can find a place of welcome. This is the principle that should guide all our actions: If there ain't any shade, it ain't the Kingdom of God. Pray with me that God will make us shade trees. AMEN