

PROPER TWELVE, PENTECOST 9, YEAR A, JULY 31, 2023

In the Gospel lesson this morning we have a series of short vignettes that describe the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is like . . . a mustard seed . . . a bit of yeast in dough . . . a hidden treasure . . . a pearl of great value . . . a net catching fish.

Probably the most familiar of these short little vignettes is the kingdom of God described as a mustard seed. If you attended Sunday School as a youngster you probably were even given a mustard seed. I remember having a bracelet that had a little clear ball attached to it with a mustard seed inside it. The mustard seed is so tiny that it takes 750 seeds to make one gram. And, of course, what we were taught is that this tiny mustard seed has tremendous growth and that we need to nurture the growth of the kingdom of God within us. So we have become accustomed to hearing about the mustard seed being a compelling and inspiring metaphor for our personal faith. That is certainly one way of looking at this specific parable. However there is another message that I think gets overlooked. In fact this parable is perhaps one of Jesus' most radical parables. To understand the subtlety and radical nature of this parable we need to know more about the nature of mustard seeds and Jewish law.

To do that we go to Pliny the Elder, a Roman historian who lived between 23 and 79 C.E., and wrote this about the mustard plant in his encyclopedia "Natural History": With its pungent taste and fiery effect, mustard is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand, when it has once been sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once."

So the mustard plant grows like a weed and it multiplies so quickly that you can't get rid of it and it goes everywhere. That's a pretty insidious plant that can overtake one's crops. But there is another factor about planting in general that impacts this parable. Jewish law was very specific about the kinds of food you could eat, clothes you could wear, the animals you could raise which is all spelled out in Leviticus. There is also a Jewish law that says, *You shall not sow your fields with two kinds of seed.* Lev19.

Looking at the parable, we're told the farmer has a field already and then takes the mustard seed and sows it in the field. The assumption is this field has already been planted with some other kind of seed. The people Jesus was talking too were very familiar with farming and no doubt knew how invasive the mustard seed could be. Number two, being observant Jews, they would more than likely have been struck by the unorthodox nature of the act of sowing another seed in the field. In fact, it amounted to an offense against God's covenant with Israel.

My guess is that many of Jesus' disciples, upon hearing the parable of the mustard seed were taken by surprise when they realized that a farmer was deliberately sowing a tiny time bomb in his plot. Mustard is like kudzu that invasive vine in the south that literally smothers other plants. If you plant mustard, it's there to stay. Sowing such a plant in the midst of a field, which was designated exclusively for another plant, would have been a clear violation of the law: Plus you have the birds that come to nest in the mustard trees and birds are not a desirable presence in a cultivated field. They are a nuisance and create more of a mess carrying and dropping the mustard seed even

further. So in offering this little vignette Jesus appears to be making at least two important points.

First, the Kingdom of God goes beyond what a truly observant Jew expected from the law. Jesus has introduced a new covenant which turns everything upside down. Mustard can now flourish alongside other plants, just as Gentiles can be welcomed into the Jewish fold. All the unwanted outcasts are welcomed like those pesky birds who live on the fringe and are undesirable that really teach us about how God's kingdom really works. For the Jewish people the will of God had always been made visible in the law, but now Jesus is telling them the mystery of God is made known through the unorthodox grace of God's Kingdom that welcomes everyone. The radical message is God's love is disruptive and encompasses all people even the ones who are on the fringe that we don't think are deserving. God sows God's love in the most unexpected places.

Second, this new covenant, in the same way that the mustard plant eventually takes over a field of wheat or a patch of vegetables, will take root and grow. Try as we may to contain it, in the end the work of the Kingdom has less to do with our initiative than with our cooperation in God's grace and Spirit. Yes, the mustard seed is an inspiring metaphor for what our individual faith might accomplish, but ultimately its real power lies in the overwhelming love of God and the redemption of all creation. God's love is insidious, it takes root where we least expect it, it goes everywhere and grows. The message is we cannot contain God's love and redemption by our own narrow definitions. God is not exclusive and that is probably the hardest thing for us to accept. That's the radical power of this parable. God's grace will grow despite our efforts to constrain it.

But there is another interpretation that I believe is important not to overlook. This comes from the book, *Hear Then the Parable* by Bernard Scott. In it he reminds us that even though the people knew the disruptive qualities of the mustard seed on their agricultural and religious lives they also understood mustard to have another important function. As I mentioned previously, Pliny, the historian, stated that the mustard seed was used for medicinal purposes. Again, the Jews and Gentiles were quite aware of these medicinal purposes. Pliny wrote:

"Pounded it is applied with vinegar to the bites of serpents and scorpion stings. It counteracts the poisons of fungi. For phlegm it is kept in the mouth until it melts, or is used as a gargle with hydromel. For toothache it is chewed.... It is very beneficial for all stomach troubles.... It clears the senses, and by the sneezing caused by it, the head; it relaxes the bowels; it promotes menstruation and urine. That's quite an impressive list of medicinal uses.

In other words, this apparently insignificant seed not only wreaks havoc on fields, as many farmers could attest, it is also invaluable in curing many of the ills that plague us as human beings. How much more appealing to think about the spread of this invasive species, this metaphor for the Kingdom of God, as a reintroduction of health and healing into our world. So often, we conceive of God's Kingdom as existing in some heavenly sphere far removed from the normalcy of our day-to-day existence. But the Kingdom of God is here and now so our true vocation as Christians is to be a healing presence here and now.

So this parable is no simplistic illustration to the miraculous growth of any old seed; it is about mustard, and more mustard. Yes, we can apply it to our personal lives, knowing that even the smallest measure of faith can move mountains. But more importantly, we need to begin acknowledging its significance in all aspects of our lives as well. Through God's grace we have two roles to play. First, we need to be a disruptive presence in the midst of those who want to maintain "the way things are," or the status quo or keep "certain people out" and recognize everyone as part of God's kingdom. Our narrow view of who God accepts is shattered by this radical message. If we are bearers of God's love then we need to be inclusive. But perhaps our greatest calling is to be what mustard had long been in the Mediterranean of the first century, a healing presence. Maybe this was the original reason for the gardener sowing this plant in the first place – to bring healing to those who so desperately need it. If that's the case, shouldn't we allow ourselves to be cast as seeds of peace into a broken world?

I think when Jesus' disciples first heard that some foolish gardener was sowing that pesky mustard plant in the midst of his well-tended corner of a field their reaction must have been this is crazy, a disaster and certain ruin. Only later would they realize that such is the folly of God, bound by no clear conventional or covenantal logic, but intent all the same on sowing and harvesting the wisdom of God's healing presence, love and redemption in the world. So let it be for us as well. Amen.