

Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

³¹ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened...."

⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

⁵¹ "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

A pastor was giving the children's message during church. For this part of the service, he would gather all the children around him and give a brief lesson before dismissing them for children's church. On this particular Sunday, he was using squirrels for an object lesson on industry and preparation.

He started out by saying, "I'm going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is."

The children nodded eagerly.

"This thing lives in trees -pause- and eats nuts." -pause-

No hands went up.

"And it is gray -pause-and has a long bushy tail." -pause-

The children were looking at each other, but still no hands raised.

"And it jumps from branch to branch." -pause- "...and chatters and flips its tail when it's excited..." -pause-

Finally, one little boy tentatively raised his hand. The pastor breathed a sigh of relief and called on him.

"Well," said the boy, "I KNOW the answer must be Jesus...but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!"

I wonder if the crowds were disappointed—perhaps some of the disciples too. Jesus tells one more parable about seeds and plants, followed by stories of baking bread, plowing a field, and fishing. Yes, he throws in one story about a wealthy merchant, but all the rest are as ordinary as a mustard bush. No kings, or even princes, populate these parables of the kingdom. No military generals or revolutionary leaders to please Simon the Zealot or his colleague Judas. They must have felt let down. These didn't sound like the kingdom of heaven.

I wonder if we might be disappointed too. I doubt our visions of heaven include mustard bushes and housework. God is more often seen as "Lord" or "King" than farmer or baker woman. Most of our contemporary Christian music sings about "enthroning" Jesus, raising him up and exalting him in the highest heaven.

However, the stories Jesus tells of his kingdom and of that heaven are down to earth, literally. They are common stories about ordinary people—a tenant farmer, a

housewife, fishermen—doing everyday things. This is hardly an exalted vision of God's realm.

Of course, that is the whole point. As Christians, we are called to believe in the incarnation, the mystery of the meeting of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. In his parables, Jesus puts the focus not on himself but on the world around him. "The kingdom of God is like" (vv. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47) the most common things in human life. Like Jesus himself, this everyday world embodies the sacred meeting of divine and human, if only we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

Jesus' parables differ significantly from Greek or Roman myths or Aesop's fables. Jesus' stories have no gods in human disguise or talking animals, just real-life women and men going about their everyday work. **Talitha J. Arnold**

Mustard and yeast, a thief and a merchant. We are struck by the shady, subversive, corrupted presenting character of these parables. Mustard (v. 31) is a weed a farmer would pull from a field, but here God's empire is compared to the mustard seed, starting very small but growing into a shrub. Yeast (or leaven, v. 33), the agent that bloats and rots corpses and what a woman would clean from her house in preparation for Passover, is here a positive: God is fermenting the kingdom of the heaven within the world, like the woman who mixes—or spoils—flour with yeast.

Finding the kingdom of heaven is compared to a man who finds a treasure (v. 44) in someone else's field and then liquidates all his assets to buy the field without telling the owner about the treasure. What was the man doing digging around in someone else's field in the first place? His action is a theft. Merchants (v. 45) were held in the public esteem about as highly as our culture values used-car salespersons. Their motives and scruples were suspect. This merchant, however, in effect puts himself out of business by selling everything to make an ultimate

purchase. Once one has sacrificed everything to make the ultimate purchase, there is nothing left to buy and sell.

These parables elevate convention-subverting persons and items to describe discipleship in the kingdom of heaven. Whatever else they mean; these parables hint that God's empire—and therefore good citizenship in God's realm—is fundamentally different from Rome's. **Gary Peluso-Verdend**

For Jesus, God's realm is not some kingdom in the sweet by and by, but as close as the next mustard bush or loaf of bread. That nearness, far more than the threat of eternal agony, is the basis for his call to belief. These parables envision God in every nook and cranny of daily life, from kneading dough to plowing fields or whatever is the occupations we have done. Jesus transforms human life not by scaring the heck out of us, but by helping us see the heaven close at hand.

Jesus does not use a stately cedar of Lebanon to envision God's kingdom, but a lowly mustard plant. Its seed is a symbol of the tiniest thing, and the plant it produces is a trash tree—or more accurately, a trash bush, no matter how tall it gets. Mustards are weeds of their day. **Talitha J. Arnold**

So, imagine with me the mustard seeds, almost weightless and growing into invasive weeds that sprout up wild, they would not have been deliberately sown in the neat rows of a farmer's field. Mustard seeds—lying undetected in a big sack of some other kind of seed—are finally thrown onto the waiting soil in the same handful as that other, more dominant seed; no one suspects for an instant that any plant other than the one that is planned will sprout and grow up. A mustard tree is not what is expected, but no one notices the seed. It is hard to see, hard to keep an eye on, but it has a way of mixing with what is more noticeable. At the end of the day, as it germinates and sprouts and grows, its final result radically reorients what is expected.

Maybe those disciples were shocked to hear Jesus say, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," because maybe they would assume that the planting and cultivation of such a kingdom is more orderly and predictable, laid out in neat rows. The kingdom of heaven is like soybeans, or like beautiful rows of sunflowers or corn or cotton or grapes. What goes in is what is planned and is altogether similar to what grows up.

However, when the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, maybe that suggests that nicely bounded rows of expected crops are forever being invaded and overturned by an inbreaking that is finally unexpected. Mustard seeds just hide there in the sack of other seeds or in the hand of an unsuspecting sower.

Then there is the leaven for 100 loaves of bread, in a tradition where yeast is a symbol of corruption and impurity. The leaven in the parable is not the same as the yeast used in modern kitchens. In the culture of Scripture, leaven is almost universally understood as something evil or unclean. The leavening agent of the time was created by setting aside a portion of leftover bread to spoil, in order to create leaven used in future baking. Not spoiled enough, it is worthless and cannot cause the new batter to rise. Allowed to spoil too long, it not only ruins the bread but can result in food poisoning. Leaven can be fatal. Only a small portion—like a mustard seed—is needed to leaven flour. The "three measures of meal" with which the woman mixes the leaven would produce enough bread for a wedding feast. In Jesus' parable yeast becomes the agent of the miraculous growth of God's kingdom. If God can use mustard seed and corrupt leaven to grow the kingdom, imagine what God can do with you and me.

Abundance from the smallest of things, miraculous transformations from trash bush to tree of life, from corrupt leaven to bread enough to feed the multitudes. God's kingdom is like that, according to Jesus.

No wonder the next two parables tell of people who gladly give up everything for that treasure. The extravagant response of the tenant farmer and the pearl merchant is matched only by the extravagant mustard bush and loaves of bread. The kingdom worth the price of the great pearl or the hidden treasure is not made of silver or gold, but of bushes and bread. No simple moral fables, Jesus' parables demand us to choose God's way and God's kingdom. Jesus does not let us off the hook. The nearness of God's realm challenges us daily to choose His realm.

More often than not, we want to draw clear, unarguable boundaries around the kingdom of heaven. It is fair to have doubts, fair to explore what we believe and what we have trouble believing; but it is not fair for us to gather on Sunday and say, "Jesus Christ is Lord!" while at the same time behaving as if Jesus were dispensable—just a nice guy living in the first century who went about doing good.

In the church, we want to be able to define what fits within it and what does not. So naturally, there are important formulaic things that we say. We have Scripture. We have creeds. We have our understanding of the Lord's Supper. We have tradition. We have convictions about baptism. We have boundaries—nice, neat rows of carefully tended doctrine and practice.

Then, just to keep us honest, and just when we are least expecting it, we also have the voice of God whispering in our ear—pushing us beyond our boundaries, forcing us to discern whether they are in fact our boundaries or God's boundaries. In this sense, "the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed"—a tiny little symbol of how God is forever invading our orderly sense of things. It just hides there—in the sack, in the hand, in the church, in the mind of God—like a mustard seed, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great value hidden amid the rest, like the tasty fish hidden amid the whole catch.

Sometime in the early 1980s, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was interviewed on public television. It is hard to believe now, but that was back when apartheid was

very strong and there was no outward sign that it would end any time soon. Tutu said this curious thing: "When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, 'Let us pray.' When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal."

The kingdom of heaven, like the mustard seed, invades the cultivated soil of our certainties and our boundaries and creates out of it all something new—"the better of the deal." Hidden within what we think we see so clearly, it is subversive and grows up in unexpected ways until what we thought we knew is transformed and redeemed by our surprising, invasive God.

The story is told of a man who had been on the outs with the church ever since his adolescent days. The church, he said, was too concerned about the rules, so he left and said he was finished with it. His father worked on him, begging him to give the church another chance, and finally the man agreed that he would. He got up the nerve one Sunday and wandered into a church. The congregation was in the middle of the prayer of confession. "We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us." The man heard that and smiled to himself. "Good!" he said. "This sounds like my kind of crowd." **Theodore J. Wardlaw**

The writer of Matthew tells us the kingdom is embraced by the marginalized, the unclean, and the left out; and says that response to the kingdom merits giving all that one has in the present to gain it. Those who do so discover Jesus' true family. Those who have ears to hear listen and understand. **J. David Waugh**

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