

4th Pentecost  
June 17, 2018  
Church of the Advent

## **Mustard Parables**

What image comes to mind when you think of mustard? For some it might be squirt of simple French's yellow on a grilled hot dog—like the one I enjoyed at the parish cookout at Don and Corey's last Sunday evening. For others it might be a Spicy brown on ham and swiss, or Chicken Dijon made with Gray Poupon—and what ever happened to those commercials? What comes to my mind even before the image of classic Varsity hot dog in Atlanta, is a stray cat we adopted long ago, a yellow tiger male we named Mustard, or "Moutarde" as he was called by our next door neighbor, Tom. I had picked him up in my first year of medical school outside the classroom building early one morning—before he got trampled—and managed to keep him in my backpack until I could take him home at the end of the day. His nickname "Moutarde" captured the irony of such a tiny, scrawny, barely alive piece of fur when I found him, growing into a rather large and impressive cat who acted more like a small lion—not mean by any stretch, but self-assured and protective of babies and puppies—through 3 moves in two states. We took in a lot of stray cats over the years, but Mustard was by far tiniest one who grew into the heaviest, sweetest, and most personable of all of them, and he was part of our family for several years before he wandered off one day to wherever cats go when they die. He was a big old sweetie who enriched our lives with affection and humor, and the more than occasional gift of a live mouse.

Jesus used a similar play on words in Mark's gospel, describing the Kingdom of God as a mustard seed, created to grow into a gigantic bush that would become large enough to be a home to nesting birds. The Season after Pentecost—Ordinary Time—is the season of the parables of Jesus, many of them about growing things, intended to connect with the simple folk of Galilee. A parable is more than a metaphor—which uses an image or figure of speech to clarify something by drawing a comparison. Parables are more complex stories, intended not just to define or explain something, but to offer a moral lesson, a spiritual principle, or a truth that is difficult to hear or to believe. More often than not, when Jesus told a parable to the disciples, he asked them if they understood, sometimes he later broke it down to explain to them what he had been trying to tell them.

The Kingdom message of Jesus was difficult to grasp, because it did not fit into the historical notion of kingdoms his listeners were familiar with. They knew about the kingdoms of Saul, and David, Solomon and Herod. Kingdoms involved having power and showing it off, warfare with victories and defeat, leading to winning or losing land, and becoming enslavers or enslaved. Jesus could have just stood up like the prophets before him and just told them this was not what God wanted for God's Kingdom, but they would not have understood. So he told parables to challenge their assumptions, to make them think, to reach their hearts where each human has been created with the capacity for empathy and compassion.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know

how...“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

The First Century Jewish farmer—like farmers in the present day—knew that the mustard bush was not a tree—but an invasive weed which grew fast and wild and could overcome more domesticated crops, very much *not* a tree like the Cedars of Lebanon—a proud and powerful symbol of the Reign of David. The 17<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Prophet Ezekiel describes these majestic cedar trees in the voice of God:

I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs;  
I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.  
On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.  
Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

The hard truth that Jesus shares in his parable of the mustard seed is that the Kingdom of God could not be understood as it always had been before—a great and noble cedar at the top of the mountain. That understanding had failed—just as human kings that the Israelites demanded had failed. The Almighty God had planted those kings like giant Cedars of Lebanon to produce boughs and noble fruit; instead they produced communities undermined by self-interest—destroyed by greed and betrayals. Generations of human kings of Israel had not only failed to bring about the Reign of God, but pretty much brought destruction down upon their earthly kingdoms, too—neglecting the needs of God’s people, causing them to be sent into exile and slavery. So that old parable for the Kingdom of God just did not work anymore.

The new parable that Jesus brought was the Good News that the Kingdom of God is more like a common bush that grows from the smallest seed to the largest spreading shrub, thick with branches to make accessible, hospitable shelter for everyone, no exceptions listed. He wanted his disciples to take their eyes off the top of the mountain, to stop climbing over others to get there, and to look around them for neighbors to love as much as they loved themselves. As Paul said, *if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; everything has become new!*

Jesus was also saying that it was possible to re-establish a *new* covenant with God by grasping that our lives hold all the significance of the smallest of seeds, that once scattered on the ground, sprout and grow in spite of ourselves—even while we are sleeping and otherwise occupied. Each seed scattered to the ground makes its way from seed to germ, leaf to bud, stalk to grain or trunk by the grace of God and outside of our control. We may till the soil and scatter the seed, but God sends the sun and the rain, and the metamorphosis from seed to grain (or shrub or tree) is a holy mystery by which we are sustained, and for which we can only give thanks. The Kingdom of God is *gift*, and available to everyone—every bird of the air that makes a nest in its shade, and we are drawn into the wild and crazy branches of its invasive growth by grace.

We can choose to listen and pay attention; we can choose to believe, and we can choose to act out of love for others because we have first been loved. But we can't always choose how big and wild that mustard shrub is going to get, or which birds we might find ourselves nesting next to. Our job is to be the best birds we can be, to sing our hearts out, and to make room for others—because we don't own the bush!

The Kingdom of God is like the smallest of seeds, or the smallest of kittens thrown into our path, offered as revelation over time of the rich and wonderful nature of God whose capacity for wild abundant love can never be fully understood, but whose gift of sheltering grace is always ready to welcome us all. Amen.

