

Messiah Moravian Church
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Third Sunday after Pentecost
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DANDELIONS, KUDZU AND MUSTARD

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He sprinted away, the tiger in close pursuit. Coming to a cliff, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine held him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little began gnawing on the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

This famous koan (spelled k-o-a-n) comes from the Zen Buddhist spiritual tradition. Perhaps, like me, you are wondering, well OK, but what does it mean? Like parables in the Western tradition, a Zen koan is intended to jolt the mind out of its placid, logical reasoning. Both are meant to shake up our preconceptions and to transform our understanding.

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg writes that a parable is “a story that invites hearers to see something they might not otherwise see.” Parables, as first told by Jesus, were intended to be challenging, confrontive and disruptive. They were meant to be unsettling by calling into question what listeners might have previously believed and by confronting them with a surprising and often unexpected truth.

Unfortunately, the parable of the Mustard Seed has been saddled with easy, simplistic interpretations over the centuries. We are so far removed from the context and culture of first century Palestine that its provocative truth has been reduced to a trite Western cliché. As professor Amy-Jill Levine, in her brilliant book *Short Stories by Jesus*, writes, “There is no challenge in hearing that from small beginnings come great things.... To speak of the parable as demonstrating that great outcomes arrive from small beginnings is correct, but it is banal.”

However, that interpretation comfortably fits current Western culture. We embrace it and enjoy hearing it again and again. It is the story of the *Blind Side* movie, where the adopted son from the poor side of town becomes a NFL star. It’s the Oprah Winfrey story, where a single teenage mother, who grew up without running water or electricity, becomes one of the wealthiest women in the world. It’s *Cinderella*; it’s *Annie*; it’s the *Slumdog Millionaire* movie--it’s the rags to riches motif that we love.

Perhaps we like this story line so much because we prefer to imagine ourselves as the hero in the story. We want to be the one who goes from insignificant stature to something great.

We believe this is what God wants for us, and therefore we see ourselves as the seed in the parable, growing from lowly to magnificent.

To be honest, this is a destructive narrative in our nation right now. Lots of folks claim that they have not received or are losing the greatness promised them by God. They see themselves as the ones to whom Jesus promises greatness, but they cry foul when they are not perceived as being great. Any reading of this parable that promises comfort, wealth, greatness and exceptionalism is potentially toxic.

Jesus's parables were intended to provoke and confront, not placate and comfort.

To understand how the Mustard Seed parable teaches us about the kingdom of God, we must hear it with the ears of Jesus's listeners, that is, a largely uneducated agrarian society. Without that same agricultural background, such metaphors may quickly be lost on us. For example, what do we know about the cultivation and uses of mustard plants? Is it a good or bad thing to be compared to a mustard plant?

Are the "birds of the air" that find a home in the mustard plant really welcome additions to a farm? What would first century farmers think about birds making nests among plants they so carefully cultivated?

Someone sows a mustard seed. The irony here is that people in Jesus's day did not plant mustard seeds. While some varieties were used as pungent spice and others medicinally, in general, the common black mustard plant of Palestine was considered at the very least pesky and often somewhat dangerous. Wild mustard is a weed—a noxious, stubborn weed. Once it takes root, if it is not aggressively contained, it can overtake a whole planting area. Mustard would only occasionally be found in a garden in the ancient world. More likely, one would see it overtaking a hillside or an abandoned field. It was not something farmers would have desired to have in their garden. By comparison, imagine a gardener today intentionally planting kudzu or dandelions. Who purposely plants kudzu or dandelions?

Why someone would intentionally plant such an uncontrollable weed is provocative, and Jesus's listeners would have considered it a foolish action.

That the farmer doesn't try to trim, prune, or limit the growth of the plant is also provocative. What does it mean to give free reign to a plant that can best be called an obnoxious weed? What does it mean to give up control over such growth and trust its growth to God?

Equally provocative is the image of birds finding shade in the branches. Are birds what gardeners really want to attract? Why would any farmer want birds taking up residence amidst his crop, wreaking havoc and eating precious seeds and fruit?

These are the kind of questions that the first hearers would have struggled with because they understood the agricultural implications of Jesus's imagery.

So what is Jesus trying to tell us with this parable? What does it mean to take an invasive, unattractive weed and use it as an image for God's kingdom? What does it tell us about who matters in God's kingdom?

Jesus says, this is what the kingdom of God is like: it's like a weed, being intentionally sown, where it can invade, overturn, and eventually become so prolific that it overwhelms everything else there and, in doing so, it invites the unwanted and unwelcomed to a home.

As scholar John Dominic Crossan writes:

The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher. It is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedars of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [more] like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses—if you could control it.

Jesus suggests that the kingdom of God is something we cannot control. It is definitely not safe or tame, especially if we are satisfied with the way things are. The kingdom of God comes to overtake and transform the kingdoms of this world. Of course, this is a warning to those who benefit from and are satisfied with the way the world is. Who wants a new kingdom if you have it pretty good in the present one? But for those who are left out and left behind or who believe the world could and should be a better place, then Jesus's parable is a promise, a promise that brings hope for the coming of God's kingdom. We cannot control it or even summon it but we can look for it and even aid its unexpected growth.

The kingdom Jesus describes, for all its miraculous expansion, remains lowly, like a mustard seed. Jesus welcomed, healed and taught common people. He used ordinary, everyday characters and objects in unexpected descriptions of God's kingdom. According to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is found in what today we would metaphorically call our own backyards, among the weeds, among even dandelions, kudzu and mustard.