

Proper 6B  
Mark 4:26-34  
June 18, 2006

### **Little Seeds and Noxious Weeds**

Jesus taught in parables. Everyone knows that. He took scenes and objects from ordinary life and he made them tell stories about the reign of God. The trouble for us is that the scenes and objects were from the ordinary life of his hearers, not our ordinary life.

Take this parable of the mustard seed, for example. It is, says Jesus, the smallest of the seeds. This isn't true, we know, but his saying so is an example of the common Jewish practice of exaggeration. Not the smallest, precisely, but pretty small. Toss it on the ground and when it germinates and takes root it becomes, well, not the greatest of shrubs, but pretty darn big. From very small to very big. So big that the birds nest in it.

Birds like shrubs. They can see predators coming. But predators can't really move very well through bushes, so the birds are a little safer than they would be otherwise.

If you want to attract birds, good advice is to provide some bushes. Of course, a bird bath and some bird feeders don't hurt either. Even if we don't go through the bother of planting bushes, filling a bird bath and stocking feeders, we like birds. The more birds the better.

So here is the mustard seed. Plant it and it becomes a shelter for birds. Isn't that nice! This is the ordinary sense we make of this scene from ordinary life. The mustard bush is a good thing because the birds are a good thing.

Birds are a good thing, unless you happen to be a landowner in Roman Palestine. In those days in and that place they practiced what is called "scratch plowing." First the seed was sown on the unworked ground. Then a scratch plow was dragged across the field to cover the seed with the thinnest of layers of dirt. They had no moldboard plows that dig deep and turn the earth over. They had no corn drills to make sure that the seeds were planted at the ideal depth, safely away from the birds.

So when the sower left the field, the birds came, picking through the dirt and eating the seeds.

And then later, toward harvest time, when the grain began to ripen, the birds would ravage the crop again.

The birds of the air were not the delight to them that they are to us. They were a nuisance; they were obnoxious pests.

And the mustard bushes that gave them shelter? The mustard bushes were noxious weeds that disrupted the economy of the great landowners, threatened the smooth operation of their great farms, slowed the amassing of wealth and power into the hands of the rich. If the Roman Empire was a machine that ran on grain; then the mustard was a plant that clogged the works, adding friction to the system, slowing it down, even bringing it to a stop sometimes.

Now let's hear the parable of the mustard seed. "What is the reign of God—God's empire—like? How does it operate? What sort of metaphor can we use for it? It's like a mustard seed. The mustard seed is small. You can crush it between your fingers, grind it in a spice mill. A

mustard seed doesn't look like much. But don't let looks deceive! The mustard seed grows into a large bush that gives shelter to the pesty birds. The mustard seed is a threat, a nuisance, a menace, even to the mighty. That's what the reign of God is like. It doesn't look like much. It's small. But its power to disrupt the smooth functioning of unjust systems is huge."

To what ordinary object would Jesus compare the reign of God today—an object that we would recognize without having to have two minutes worth of explanation before we understand? How about these?:

The reign of God is like a tiny pebble. It doesn't look like much, but it can bring the strongest man to a stop if it's in his shoe.

The reign of God is like a wasp. A wasp is a tiny insect that can be crushed with a fist. You wouldn't think that it's very strong. But introduce one into a crowded room and see how disruptive it can be!

The reign of God is like a grain of sand. It can be so small that you can hardly see it. It's entirely insignificant, unless it gets in your eye.

Or maybe it would be good to stick with the seedy theme of today's lesson: The reign of God is like a thistle seed. It's only a tiny seed, but look what it can do to a nicely manicured suburban lawn! To a lawn where we love to see our children playing. Where we can sit and watch them running barefoot in the grass and not have to see the children who do not run anywhere for fear of stepping on one of the landmines that lie seeded in their neighborhoods, landmines seeded and grown to a destructive crop of shattered limbs and amputated lives, landmines left over from the bad old days of World War III when our friends fought their friends in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia, landmines made in the good ol' USofA by good folks like us who went home from their jobs to their weed-free lawns, sat in the shade, drank lemonade, and watched their children running barefoot in the grass. Do you see what a thistle seed can do?

The reign of God—God's empire—works like the thistle seed. It's small to the point of insignificance. But give it any place at all to take root and it will become a royal pain, hurting feet that had other business, distracting attention, disrupting the smooth functioning of a world that it all-too-often a place of injustice, defiant in its insistence that it can order its life without regarding in the least the demands of the God of Jesus for justice and peace. The reign of God is a seed that grows into a noxious weed, giving aid and comfort to those who ask unsettling questions, providing cover for those who make the world uncomfortable and uneasy.

That's not exactly the way we're accustomed to reading that parable, is it?

To Jesus' hearers I suspect it was a word of encouragement—since they were peasants and workers. Don't worry if you think that what you're up against is so much bigger than you are. Don't worry if the forces trying to dehumanize your life seem so much stronger than you are. Don't worry if the odds in your struggle for dignity seem overwhelming. Remember the mustard seed!

I suppose it sounded like something else to the wealthy and powerful. Don't imagine that your strength and your wealth and your power will mean that you can resist the reign of God. God's empire works in ways that you cannot stop. Remember the mustard seed!

What we hear depends very much on where we stand.

With us, I think, or at least with me, it is rather more complicated. You and I are neither powerless nor among the powerful elite, but somewhere in the middle. Unlike the displaced peasants of Jesus' audience, we have enough at stake in the world as it is to be fearful of any great change. Unlike the elite among his hearers, we don't feel particularly powerful. We would like simply to go about living our lives, trying to be kind and considerate of each other, helping our children as we are able and—when they are older—as they permit it. We would like to mind our own business while other people mind theirs. We have found a comfortable place, and, God willing, we would like to stay in it.

But then we hear this story about a mustard seed which, as it turns out, is not at all about establishing a wildlife refuge or nature conservancy. Instead, it is a call to see that the God of Jesus is at work in the world, yes, in part to uphold and sustain, but also to disturb, disrupt and dislocate. God's empire is like a thistle seed that can take root anywhere—even in the tiniest crack in the pavement. Give it time and it will take any structure and crumble it into dust.

If that is true then to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, isn't simply about being kind and considerate; it's also about being servants of the disturbing, disrupting and dislocating God. It's about inciting disturbances in the smooth functioning of injustice. It's about watching over disruptions of the culture of war-making. It's about tending dislocations in the arrangements of power.

If it is true that the reign of God is like a seed that becomes a noxious weed, and if it is true that the Church is called to show the world what the reign of God looks like, then I suggest that we are too concerned with fitting into streets of well-manicured suburban lawns. Not nearly enough powerful people say about us, Now there's a noxious weed if ever I saw one! We too little resemble a thistle or even a mustard plant. In short, we aren't nearly seedy enough.

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