

Year A, Pentecost 7

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Thomas L. Truby

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Sowing Parables!

On this third week with Jesus and parables about seeds and sowing we again encounter a puzzling story. This time the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed **that someone took** and sowed in his field. Who did that? Who sowed that mustard seed? No one would deliberately sow a mustard seed in their field. Mustard is a weed and quickly grows taller than wheat. My father hated mustard seed and I remember fanning the oats early in the spring to get rid of it before we planted the fields?

Then Jesus said the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds that grows into the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree. That's not true! There are lots of seeds smaller than a mustard seed. Have you seen a mustard seed? And while a mustard plant might get six feet tall that doesn't make it the greatest of shrubs and turn it into a tree. Why is Jesus exaggerating? The people to whom Jesus spoke would be thinking these thoughts and asking these questions.

This mustard tree gets so big the birds of the air come and build their nests in its branches. How is any of this like the kingdom of heaven? Are we talking about that place we go after we die? Jesus seems to have another meaning in mind. It seems to be something he is bringing, something he is teaching that we can become part of now, before we die, and something that grows and is somehow subversive like weeds in the strawberries. It starts out small but gets large. You can't see it at first but later you can't help but see it. In its maturity it waves in the wind as it towers above the wheat, blossoming yellow. Maybe it's time for us to start seeing the mustard plant for what it is. Clearly it is waving in the wind if we have eyes to see.

A mustard seed is a little smaller than the seed of a radish and the food of birds that would gobble it up if they found it on hard ground. But the birds missed it and now it has grown into a tree and they build their nests in. What is Jesus telling us about this "kingdom of heaven?"

In a section of Matthew 13 that our lectionary excludes, the text reads:

"Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

What is Jesus proclaiming here that has been hidden from the foundation of the world? Maybe the mustard seed the birds missed is Jesus; his life, death and resurrection. They could not gobble him up even though they consumed him. What he brought into our world has become a tree. And now those who sought to destroy him build their homes in the cover of his protection. What is this thing he is talking about?

He starts out small, a baby in Bethlehem, planted in the soil of human suffering and error. He grows into adulthood and senses the way the world is built on the backs of its victims; its poor, it's falsely accused and it's innocent but powerless children. He identifies with them, heals them and shows them One who loves them even though they have been taught to not value themselves. With his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, he shows them there is no division where some are weeds destined for burning and others are wheat, precious and headed for the granary of his care. We are all a loved mixture.

Since the foundation of the world human culture has attempted to maintain a fragile, intermittent and costly peace by pushing its problems onto those who cannot protect themselves. The world has built its peace on making some weeds so that others can be wheat. It is a system based on lies, deception and violence and Jesus saw it and saw that it was wrong. The kingdom of heaven is his intervention. This is why the father wanted him planted as a mustard seed in the first place. You see, Jesus' Father was the mysterious someone who planted that mustard seed in the field.

Jesus became a weed and allowed us to pull him as a way of showing us what we do to one another. When we saw what we do, done to him, the thing we had hidden from ourselves since the beginning could never again be hidden. The mustard seed had sprouted and could not be rooted out. It grew and grew. For two thousand years it has been growing and it is growing still. This message this morning is a part of its growing.

The kingdom of heaven is that growing awareness that God is not violent. All along Jesus has been showing us another way. It is the way of gentleness and forgiveness; a way that suffers violence rather than inflicts it; a way that respects differences and does not see them as sources of badness, a way that honors the other tenderly and sees no one as enemy. The kingdom of heaven is living in this new way taught by Jesus before we die.

The world has changed and is changing because Jesus entered it. If the mustard bush growing into a tree is the developing awareness of how we attempt to stabilize culture through excluding people, think about the changes in the last hundred years. Slaves, women, handicapped, those with a different sexual orientation, race—no longer are any of this reason for exclusion. Even the birds of the air, those natural enemies of small seeds, now build their nests in the branches of this tree of life. Even those who most strongly oppose the revelation of the scapegoating mechanism, the mechanism hidden at the core of culture that philosophers refuse to see, now take refuge in the protection Jesus provides them. Everyone is claiming to be a victim and hiding in that tree. This awareness of the excluded victim is permeating the world, spreading everywhere, particularly now with the enhancements of the digital age. "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Do you want to be part of the kingdom of heaven? I do. The next three short parables stimulate desire for the kingdom of heaven and warn us to act now before the desire wanes:

“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.” I want that treasure!

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” I have spent my life looking for the pearl of great price and now I have found it. I will sell everything to have it.

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

I don't like that last part and don't understand why Matthew has Jesus saying that. It sounds like just the opposite of what I have been saying. But maybe Matthew or Jesus is trying to get us to commit, to invest, to go for it, to act on the motivation we feel and to choose to follow Jesus with all that we are. He doesn't want us to be like the seed sown among rocks.

Finally Jesus asks his disciples, “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” Do you really think they did? Since they said they did, 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.”

These parables have trained us for the kingdom of heaven. Now we know that the old treasure is the new awareness of the mercy and compassion of God. May we enjoy it, live in it and spread it around. Amen.