

MUSTARD SEEDS

Mark 4:26-34

There is so much to love about the parables. They are so on the ground. With the Parable of the Mustard Seed Jesus seems to want us to get the idea about the kingdom of God by using the most relatable elements – like seeds. Certainly, the people listening to him two thousand years ago would have first-hand experiences with yeast and salt and pruning and planting. We modern folks might feel a bit removed from the earthiness of his metaphors. They might take a bit more exploration for our lives where mustard seeds come in jars with names like Grey Poupon.

Seeds have many medicinal properties like being anti-inflammatory, but Jesus isn't directing our attention to how the mustard plant might benefit us but rather in his story the benefits are for the birds. How sweet is that. I know you good people of St Benedicts care a lot about the birds and the bees, so I know you are sympathetic to this story.

Just think of it – the tiniest of seeds, the most modest – is the seed that Jesus uses for his parable. Does he mean us? Are we the seeds? Or is the Word of God the seed? Either way he doesn't use the acorn that will grow into an impressive tree that could give much more shade and housing than a mere mustard bush. He doesn't use a sequoia that lives for centuries offering lifetimes of accommodation for animals. He uses the humblest of seeds and a bush that doesn't require much care and will spread and take over large areas.

I wonder a lot about our evangelical siblings who preach grandiose sermons promising wealth and health for the most faithful. But maybe it's because they don't use a lectionary like we do so they can pick and choose the scripture to build their case. Oh geez, I sound very judgmental. Sorry. It is just that the gospel is the absolute opposite of grandiosity. The opposite of celebrity or over-accumulating anything. It is truly more about downward mobility than upward! The first will be last in the Reign of God.

The mustard seed parable is exactly why I choose to become Christian. From my early twenties through my fifties, I had been a Buddhist. I loved and still love this tradition and its core commitment to compassion. I was also steeped in the yoga tradition of postures, meditation, and the more esoteric practices. But I eventually realized that the world I was so immersed in was all too often oblivious to the suffering in the world. People were talking more about "my practice" or "my teacher" than how to make the world a better place.

My mom, a woman of great faith, suggested to me that I try church. It was a radical idea for me. I thought of Christianity as homophobic, judgmental, small minded, and at best sort of saccharine sweet. My dad had been trying to save my sisters and my souls for years by sending us the book *Left Behind* for Christmas on more than one occasion. But my mother was an Episcopalian and a lifetime progressive. Something inside me said to give it a try.

She came to visit, and we went to a local church near where I was living at that time. I remember the moment I walked up the steps to the church and thought, *“This is going to change everything.”*

The service was lovely, the sermon was intelligent, but the music took me apart. Something in the words of the hymn about becoming fire touched my heart in a way I had never felt, and I started crying – seriously crying. I looked over and my mom was crying too. We both were falling apart. There were not enough tissues to cope with the amount of liquids coming out of us. Mom was embarrassed so we made a dash for the exit.

I still didn’t really know who Jesus was, but I knew that he cared for the least and healed the sick. I knew he taught peace and justice. I knew he was not trendy. And I was tired of trendiness. I longed for sincerity and the kind of compassion that fed people. When I finally dug into the story, I found myself asking God how I could serve her. Which led me to the word Chaplain. This led me to the chaplain Dennis Gibbs who was already deeply engaged with ministry in the Los Angeles County jails. He invited me into this sacred work.

I was not sure at first that I had what it takes to walk with men and women who have landed behind bars but by witnessing Brother Dennis walk up to a cell and lean in and *listen* touched my soul and opened my heart. Often the men asked Dennis to pray for them and out of his mouth would come the balm of love which brought the men to tears. In these last 18 years of prison ministry, I have grown in my capacity for compassion in a way I wouldn’t have understood was possible.

Are these the mustard seeds? I know now that yes; we were planting mustard seeds of love and hope. We were letting these men and women be heard and valued, to be seen and appreciated. And what will grow with the mysterious added ingredient of God? Sometimes we see it when Brother Dennis gets a letter from someone he is still walking with who has transformed their lives and is in love with God. And sometimes the answer is not for us to know.

All of us can lean into and trust in the parable Jesus gave us. It is simple, really. I’m sure you are planting seeds every day in countless ways. The Reign of God is *“Like a mustard seed, which 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.”*