

I love a good story. And I think many of you who know me quite well know I like to tell stories, too. Stories that often catalog some event or life experience or some stories which are just fun to read aloud due to their peculiar nature. Stories that have a great moral to them and not only give us food for thought, stories that may suggest there is a problem to be solved and once the problem is solved, it offers some “instructions for living.” Which is why I love parables and given the fact that this was Jesus’ primary method of teaching people, draws me deeper into the stories. And for the most part, I love what these little tidbits have to say.

Especially when the parables are about horticulture - which is Latin for garden, (*hortus*) and (*cultura*), which means to cultivate. You see, I get the greatest joy from cultivating the land, planting seeds or seedlings, nourishing them and of...the harvest! After all, the harvest is the culmination of all my hard work and dedication. But as any of you know that garden, the harvest isn’t always inevitable - even when I pour my heart and soul into it. Pests sometimes eat the leaves, slugs eat the roots and animals often find my garden to be a smorgasbord of delight. (ask me later about the woodchuck dilemma if you want a good laugh!)

But needless to say, these “little stories” that Jesus tells in the gospel reading today, have me a bit perplexed. In fact, for Jesus’ audience, the parables may have been so counter-intuitive, or contrary to what one would expect. The teaching that Jesus was bringing to the people may have been such a shift in thinking that it was difficult to grasp. I have to wonder, if this “shift in thinking” may be difficult for me, and maybe you, to grasp, too.

Nadia Bolz-Weber says that parables are living things meant to mess with our assumptions of people and the world around us and to overthrow things we never even thought to question. Parables also bring to light two opposing viewpoints as is the case in both of the parables today. Jesus is teaching the people what it means to live in the “reign” of God as opposed to the tyranny of the empire; where oppression and injustice was spreading like an unwanted weed - sucking out the nutrients and choking out the beauty of God’s garden.

Perhaps, just perhaps, I am in need of a little refresher course on gardening and growth as it relates to the Kingdom of God. Perhaps, some of my rational, linear thinking needs a little bit of weeding itself. And in all honesty, I’m a little uneasy with stories that pull me out of my established patterns of relationship and into new ways of being. So bear with me, as I dig a little deeper into the parables from Mark today.

*“The kingdom of God (here and now) 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 and ... he does not know how. The earth produces of itself.”*

What? The one who plants the seed, randomly I might add, sleeps and rises night and day and seed grows? The parable says nothing about blood, sweat and tears intertwined within the process of growth. There is nothing about worry, or fatigue. Nothing about trying harder and harder to get the darn seed to sprout and grow. And I have to think, what this means for us as we try to transform others into our way of thinking, believing, into our vision of what the “harvest” should look like. And why all our hard work sometimes leaves us feeling resentful or defeated. You know, this reminds me of a story...

When I first got married, I worked tirelessly to get it “all right.” My vision of what a marriage, and ultimately what a family with two young boys should look like - and what my extended family should look like, too. Nothing like being an overachiever! I planted the seeds and they sprouted...for awhile. Until the marriage started to shrivel up and loved ones succumbed to addiction. And I found myself in a position where no matter how hard I tried to keep the garden growing... day and night and night and day...it wasn't sprouting the way I thought it would. You see, sometimes, we enter into difficult places in our lives, and we all do... and we have no idea how we will move forward. In fact, it feels like we have no control. No amount of “fertilizer, weed preventatives or weeding itself helps. It appears to stop growing altogether.

However, my story didn't stop growing... it grew in spite of me. In spite of my hard work. In spite of my projections about how my loved ones should grow. You see, Jesus' short story to his hearers that day reminded them - assured them - of what the seeds, scattered randomly, are supposed to do. They grow and produce. Where the seeds are planted and how they grow within the Kingdom of God are ultimately..up to God. The ground produces itself. Wow!

Barbara Brown Taylor states that the “ground” produces of itself - it has within itself the power to make a seed become a plant. So the Kingdom of God, in Greek, is likened to *automatic earth*. Earth trusted to yield its fruit without any cheerleading, manure, or worry on our part. No amount of coaxing, worry or angst will produce the harvest. Even our best efforts can not bring about God's reign of redemptive and surprising love and grace. Neither can we control it, moderate it, or domesticate it. And we definitely can't control it. You can see why I am a bit unsettled by this little parable, can't you?

If we are left shaking our heads at Jesus' parable of the growing seed, what are we to make about the mustard seed? How does that fit into the coming reign of God's kingdom and how does that fit into my thinking and growing process?

*Jesus said we can we compare the kingdom of God, to 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...*"

Now it bears mentioning here, that mustard was indeed an herb with medical properties and sometimes used for flavoring or preserving food but no one in ancient times would sow it on purpose. In general, wild mustard is incredibly hard to control, and once it takes root it can take over the whole planting area.

Case in point: I planted mint a few years ago and even though I harvest it and use it for my tea and in cooking, it has now infiltrated my daisies, is maneuvering its way into the lawn and has become a plain nuisance! Perhaps you can see the satire, the humor, in what Jesus is saying!

But what in the world is Jesus inferring when he likens the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed? Why not liken the Kingdom of God to the mighty cedars of Lebanon if he wanted to describe an in-breaking of a state of affairs that would cause people to drop everything and be impressed. Instead, Jesus describes something more ordinary, and yet also something more able to show up, to take over inch by inch, and eventually to transform a whole landscape. The Kingdom of God, you see, promises to upend a society's ways of enforcing stability and putting everyone in their proper places.

Jesus likens God's love to something that will eventually transform a whole landscape. Like a fast-replicating plant, God's reign will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places and discouraged people. It will crowd out other concerns and fears. It will *even* resist *our* manipulations and mess with *our* established assumptions of who's in and who's out and what role *we* play in the process of discipleship. What role others play in the process, too. It will *even* resist our manipulations. You see, under the watchful eye of God, hope grows.

When God tenderly transplants new sprouts, scatters seeds, and prunes the bushes...it changes the contour of the garden. And for me, hopefully you, too, it certainly takes the weight of the world off our shoulders. Living and loving become a joy when I am under the watchful of God.

But we are also called to tend the garden. We are invited to grow within God's garden, within the reign of God. Not as a passive bystander, but one that cares deeply about others. Perhaps we are invited to take a second look at others and see them as a necessary part of God's overall plan. Yes...we are part of the process but we are also reminded that the harvest doesn't always come to fruition in the ways we would expect. The seeds don't always fall in the way we would like and at times life happens in ways we don't understand at times. The parables in Mark today do not promise a gospel of unhindered progress, as if God's reign is guaranteed to be more prevalent and influential ten years from now, or even next year. Or that God's reign will bring about a

ceasefire in Gaza tomorrow, or the demolition of bombs, or a land without war, or a world without hungry children, or an end to political strife in our own backyard. Or the perfect family, or marriage or relationship. Or a world... without weeds.

Yes. I do like stories that feed my soul, are filled with satire and speak of new beginnings. And I do love to garden. However, I am still a little unsettled today by the teachings of Jesus today but I take great comfort and ease that the growth and power for a seed to become a plant ultimately, belongs to God. And the seeds that God has scattered, randomly, throughout my life... well... their germination have worked their way into my heart, that of my family, friends and all of you. But not without God's grace and mercy and love.

We are grafted to the tree of life, all of us...and we are nurtured with the waters of baptism and fed at the table of forgiveness. We are called to live into what I would call, as one who tends God's garden ...

*the agricultural grace of God. Amen.*