

Mthw 13:31-33; Ezkl 31:1-10 Seeds, Trees and Leaven May 3, 2020

Our sermon series on “gardens” continues this morning with thoughts and poetry around those small things we plant and cook with which yield unexpected returns. Poetry often times communicates to us in ways which heighten our awareness of deeper lessons. They are almost like parables. Speaking of parables, let us tuck into the second of our two parables for this morning—that of leaven and flour.

I suspect we have a few listening this day who routinely make their own bread; that is if you can find four or yeast on the store shelves. God also mixes dough, but does so at a level well beyond most of us. The parable says that a baker woman (God) uses three measures of flour; three measures of flour my friends, is a bushel. We don’t normally measure flour by the bushel so let me put it into figures we grasp more easily: that is 128 cups--6 ten pound sacks of flour-- requiring approximately 10 quarts of water which results in a dough mixture weighing some 101 pounds.¹ Under the best of circumstances the yeast in my kitchen takes several hours to do its work on a pound of flour. A dough ball weighing 101 might take considerably longer to rise, I would imagine. The kingdom of God is like yeast in a batch of dough. The yeast enters with the water and is spread throughout the 101 pounds of dough. The yeast is one with the dough, and yet different. It feeds off the dough, animates the dough, brings life to the dough and transforms the dough into a state that is fit for baking and consumption. It is indistinguishable from the dough, and yet a separate element needed to make bread. It prepares the loaf to feed a multitude. It is a small agent which enables many to be fed even as a small mustard seed grows into a tree to shelter many.

In this season of isolation and social distancing I am thinking about the gift of that small yeast of the Kingdom and ways it might be leavening the sticky bit of dough in which we find ourselves these days. The phone call made at the inspiration of intuition; the kind email or text sent; the old-fashioned letter in the mail—these are small acts which sustain the lonely and shelter the weary. In many ways these have become reflections of the Good News of God’s Kingdom in this time and place. At least this is one way I am processing events of these days. It is time for poetry which sets the stage for our next parable.

On the Parable of the Mustard Seed [Denise Levertov]

Who ever saw the mustard-plant,
wayside weed or tended crop,
grow tall as a shrub, let alone a tree, a treeful
of shade and nests and songs?
Acres of yellow,

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), p118.

not a bird of the air in sight.

No, He who knew
the west wind brings
the rain, the south wind
thunder, who walked the field-paths
running His hand along wheat stems to glean
those intimate milky kernels, good
to break on the tongue,

was talking of miracle, the seed
within us, so small
we take it for worthless, a mustard-seed, dust,
nothing.

Glib generations mistake
the metaphor, not looking at fields and trees,
not noticing paradox. Mountains
remain unmoved.

Faith is rare, He must have been saying,
prodigious, unique—
one infinitesimal grain divided
like loaves and fishes,

as if from a mustard-seed
a great shade-tree grew. That rare,
that strange: the kingdom
a tree. The soul
a bird. A great concourse of birds
at home there, wings among yellow flowers.
The waiting
kingdom of faith, the seed
waiting to be sown.

The Kingdom of God emerges through the micro, not the macro, according to our two parables of the morning. Whether true or not, our text makes the claim that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds. Clearly, first century agronomy was not as sophisticated as 21st century seed cataloguing, but the focus is on the size of the seed rather than the genus of the seed. We have the smallest of things which grows up to provide nesting habitat for the birds of the air.

In Ezekiel 31:6 we also have a tree providing nesting ground for the birds of the air. In Ezekiel, however, the tree is a Cedar whose height cannot be rivalled. It is, by Ezekiel's vision, a great tree if not the greatest of all trees. In Daniel 4 (11-12) we hear that King Nebuchadnezzar has also dreamed of a "great tree" which hosts the "birds of the air". Great trees in the Old Testament, it seems, refer to large empires. The United States with its military bases or China with its economic influence would be considered a Cedar by Old Testament standards. In both Daniel and Ezekiel, it should be noted, the great trees get their tops cropped by God on account of arrogance. I think Jesus is very much aware of the way in which great trees were portrayed in his Hebrew canon: they are political entities which extended over and exploited other nations. The great tree in our parable is really a small tree, unlike the Cedar.

Both the "Great Trees" of the Hebrew Scriptures and the mustard tree house the birds of the air, but they do so differently. The kingdom of God is not about arrogance or dominance. Jesus says that God wants to protect, care for, and minister to the birds of the world and chooses to do it through small acts rather than power politics. A mustard seed and leaven are not exciting elements, certainly not like a towering cedar tree. You do not find shingles, furniture, or heirloom chests made of mustard tree wood. And leaven, in fact, has very negative connotations in the Christian scriptures. Leaven was often used "as a metaphor for evil things...it especially symbolized corruption and uncleanness."² All the New Testament usages of leaven, except this one, are negative illustrations. It is as if Jesus is saying the kingdom of God will emerge from the most unlikely of sources—mustard seed and leaven. It is time for another poem on the beauty of the small. This poem authored by Jim Moore and reflects the tension between the mustard seed of Jesus' parable and the political empires to which it is contrasted. "Against Empire":

Small Olives taste best
Small stars shine farthest
Small birds call
most sweetly. Small lives,
we are small, small lives.³

In our two parables of this morning God is addressing us whether we are a Cedar tree or a mustard seed or feeling as if we are unclean leaven. The challenge for the cedar trees among us is to behave in a humble and generous fashion. The challenge for the mustard seeds among us is to embrace our God intended

² Gordon Zerby, "Jesus uses the power of images" (*The Mennonite*, October 10, 1995), p. 12.

³ Jim Moore, "Against Empire" in *Lightening at Dinner* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2005), p. 43.

potential. The challenge for the those who view themselves as unworthy, like leaven, is to embrace the reality that God loves us and can do amazing things through us; maybe even feeding multitudes once the bread is prepared. Too many of us view ourselves as too old, too young, too inexperienced, too flawed, too this or too that to be effective agents in God's ministry in the world. We view ourselves negatively (like leaven) or too small to do any good (like a mustard seed). But Jesus says there is meaning for those who are small and feel small, as well as those who have positions of influence. Jesus gives us purpose and meaning. Each of us, even the tiny seed, the mighty cedar, the leaven which raises the bread---- all of these have great potential. There is an opportunity for us to protect, to care for, to feed the birds of the world whatever our station in this world. This is good news. God wants to work the kingdom through us even when we feel uncertain about ourselves, and also those times we are all too certain about ourselves.

How do we nurture the seed within us so that it develops? I offer three basic exercises:

1. Yoga or regular exercise. A quote from Baba Hari Dass: "A tree is inside a seed in a subtle form. When the seed is sown the tree comes out in its [natural] form. In the same way, all knowledge is already inside your mind, and by doing yoga this knowledge comes out like a tree". Walking or yoga is a perfect time to return to our center and the people we want to be. Stay active and mindfully active.
2. Nurture the good seeds. Our minds are "like a piece of land planted with many kinds of seeds: seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding and love; seeds of craving, anger, fear, hate and forgetfulness. These wholesome and unwholesome seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of our mind. The quality of our life depends on the seeds we water. If we plant tomato seeds in our garden, tomatoes will grow. Just so, if we water a seed of peace in our mind peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness in us are watered, we will become happy. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong.
3. Practice loving speech. The book of James addresses this topic as well as wisdom teachings from other great spiritual traditions. The upshot is that in our language we are to bless and not curse; offer forgiveness; uphold those of our community who are hurting; honour our Creator. The words we use can shape the attitudes we carry, or so the notion of performative speech act present in our biblical texts suggest. So let us speak well and shape a better community and world. I will conclude this sermon with another poem. This

one is an excerpt from a Rose Marie Berger poem entitled “The Growing Seed”.⁴

The Growing Seed

in their shadowed cellars farmers collect magic seeds
who have the dreams of god
still clinging in their coats.
magic seeds that...
farmers fondle, in great scoops, between their fingers
and fling them
hither and yon
into every open mouth of soil
and even the hard teeth of rocks.
Scattering, scattering, scattering
then the farmers turn away.
they sleep they wake they joke they lie down they eat they tease they die
while the soil and the seed kiss quietly under the dipper moon.
and dream together of green...
the farmers are dreaming too
and in their dreaming wake to fresh fields,
knowing all along that the dreams of god were true

Some of us are Cedars. Some of us are mustard seeds en-route to becoming trees. Some of us are leaven which God is mixing with flour to feed multitudes. May we recognize that we have been created and sustained by God. May we adopt practices which nurture the seeds sown in us and allow tender nurture of our spirits. May we, in turn, extend goodness and refuge to those people, plants and animals who inhabit this world with us. Let us do this in every season, and particularly the pandemic season in which we currently live. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Benediction (StS #184 adapted):

The world is alive with your goodness, O God. It grows green from the ground and ripens into the roundness of fruit. Its taste and its touch enliven our bodies and stir our souls. Generously give, profusely displayed, your graces of goodness pour forth from the earth. As we have received so free us to give. As we have been granted so may we give. Amen.

⁴Rose Marie Berger, “The Growing Seed” (<https://sojo.net/magazine/may-1994/growing-seed>)