

The Mustard Seed & Other Parables of Subversion

July 31, 2011

Twenty-five years ago, South Africa was a different place. Apartheid still ruled, and black South Africans were struggling for freedom and equality. Their leader, Nelson Mandela, was still in prison. I was a college chaplain at the time, playing a small role in the anti-apartheid movement in this country: we were encouraging our college board of trustees to divest endowment funds from corporations that did business with South Africa. We believed that investment in that nation's economic life helped to keep the racist political regime in power. I remember being at a breakfast meeting with Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, an intimate affair in a Chicago ballroom with the anti-apartheid leader and several thousand of his closest friends. Tutu was a giant black South African leader who stood just over five feet; the unforgettable depth of his faith, the power of his rhetoric, the magnetism of his charismatic personality and the twinkle in his eye helped to bring down apartheid in South Africa. Before apartheid crumbled, in a public TV interview in the early 1980s, Tutu said of the Dutch

colonial missionaries who had come and taken over :

“When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better deal.”

Hidden within what we think we clearly see of a reality that we imagine will always be, is a subversive seed. Jesus said the kingdom, or reign, of God, is like the mustard seed, like yeast in the dough, like treasure in a field, like a priceless pearl among many oysters. Jesus told four such parables of subversion, about how little and seemingly insignificant things change big and seemingly unchangeable things.

“The kingdom of heaven, like the mustard seed, invades the cultivated soil of our certainties and our boundaries and creates out of it all something new—‘the better of the deal.’ Hidden within what we think we see so clearly, it is subversive and grows up in unexpected ways until what we thought we knew is transformed and redeemed by our surprising, invasive God.” [Theodore Wardlaw, *Feasting on the Word*]

The civil rights movement in South Africa had an American precursor, of course. Black slaves in our southern states were fed the Bible by some of their masters, thinking a little biblical religion would keep them quiet and submissive. Oops. There was just too much Moses overwhelming Pharaoh, too much Jesus escaping a tomb and too much Paul sprung from prison by angels to keep slaves in their place. "The better of the deal" Bible proved to be the undoing of a system that was inherently corrupt. Or, put in another way, biblical justice, like a mustard seed and yeast, corrupted the way things were, the way a slaveholding society trusted things would always be. (World without end. Amen.)

Now these parables before us today are tricky in their apparent simplicity. We may think we know all there is to know about them. They are about little things becoming big, modest things becoming dear, teaching us to look for small signs of great things to come. But consider this: Jesus may well have told these subversion parables with a Desmond Tutu twinkle in his eye. The mustard seed is tiny, but not the tiniest of all seeds. The mustard grows to a shrub or bush, but hardly a tree. Only the tiniest of birds could

make their nests there. For Jews, unleavened bread was holy, and yeast bread corrupt. And anyway, the point of these parables is not to say that the reign of God is mustard seed or yeast, but that it is like the process of surprising change that results when seeds are planted in a field and yeast is tucked in a lump of dough and one priceless pearl or hidden treasure rises to the surface of the ordinary and cheap.

These parables reveal the sense of humor of Jesus. The reign of God, he is saying, is different from the reign of Caesar or other earthly rulers. Ancient Babylon was often compared to a giant tree whose branches covered the whole earth so that, as it says in Daniel (4:10-12), "birds of the air nested in its branches and from it all living things were fed." The empire of God is quite unlike the empire of old Babylon, Jesus says. It is more like a shrub than a great tree. It is more like a weed than a marvelous monarch of the forest, an invasive species among the venerable elite of the carefully cultivated arboretum.

Throughout the Bible, the majestic trees were the cedars of Lebanon (Judges 9:15; Psalm 104:16; Isaiah 2:13; 14:8; Ezekiel

27:5), but Jesus does not point to them. He points to a shrubbery, a bush, a weed that no one would ever plant on purpose. Perhaps he is saying that the seeds of the empire of God, unlike the empires of this world, are sown by the wind, that Spirit which blows where it will. In another parable, Jesus says the kingdom is like a farmer who lets the weeds grow up with the wheat, implying that only God knows the difference. If up to us, we would pull up what we perceive as weeds, the garlic mustard, the Japanese knot weed, the burdock. (Although I try to root them out, burdock has its virtues: The Japanese use the root for something called Gobo, an essential ingredient in the preparation of sukiyaki. And the burs are said to have inspired the inventor of Velcro.)

Unlike the empires of this world, shaded by the royal cedars of Lebanon, the empire of God is littered with common weeds. The kingdom or reign of God is not what we expect. Jesus is saying to the church, "You are doing great. When you speak, your voice is like the roar of a mighty...mouse." Jesus winks. He wants us to laugh at our pretensions and to take ourselves less seriously. He wants to encourage those of us who look around and see others who are bigger and

faster and brighter and quicker and richer and better looking and more popular and see that some of these first will be last and the last first. He wants us to get it down into our bones that the poor and the peacemakers are blessed and that the meek inherit the earth and those who mourn are comforted. He wants to say in yet another way that he is with us when just two or more are gathered in his name. It's a message for a church in the shadow of larger churches with big impressive buildings and parking lots and staff and programming and childcare and seniorcare and pews full of the rich and famous. It's a message for a summer Sunday when two thirds of the congregation is doing something else. It's a message for a church that likes to sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and to praise the victorious and glorious. But what if we sang of "A Mighty Shrub" instead?

Now some of you will expect that I will end this sermon with a hymn you have never sung before. You will be right. Turn to it with me, please. Number 540:

*We plant a grain of mustard seed, and in our faith we find
the proof of God is love, indeed, which blossoms from its
kind...*

*Our actions, more than words, define how love's example
feeds a greater love, for love divine bursts forth from smallest
seeds...*

*When stooped to lend a helping hand, we find a touch that
heals, for loved invested will expand to bear the fruit love
yields...*

*Make love our purpose, love our aim, for love endures all
things, and choosing love our lives will claim the peace
forgiveness brings...*

*So may our new beginnings prove, like living bread and
wine, that through our common human love we taste what
is divine...*

*Our lives will be fulfilled and blessed if through the seeds
we've sown and by the love that we profess the love of
Christ is known...*

[1990 text by Mary Bryan Matney; tune by Sally Ann Morris]

Jesus said the empire of God begins with the mustard seed, and that even if we each begin with faith no greater than such a seed, it will be sufficient to move mountains.

(Matthew 17:20) Now that's big.