



Mustard & Birds



<Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52>

*³¹He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is **like a mustard seed** that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*

*³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is **like yeast** that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”*

*⁴⁴ “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.*

*⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is **like a merchant in search of fine pearls**; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

*⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is **like a net** that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And 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.”

We heard five parables read in our scripture today. I am only going to talk about the first one, about the mustard seed. I will leave you to ponder the rest! This is the third farming parable about seeds in this chapter of Matthew. Over the last two weeks we heard the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat. You might remember that I called this series



Parables: Truths Thrown Alongside because the word parabola literally translates as “to throw beside”. A closely related word is parable, a story that is not true, but true-like, or “thrown beside” the truth. One image was not enough for Jesus. We have 3 parables about seeds giving us multiple contradictory images where we must hold the paradoxes in tension.



Two weeks ago, as we thought about the parable of the sower, we talked about how it was not so surprising that the seeds in the good soil grew. The surprise was that the sower threw his valuable seed everywhere. Our extravagantly wasteful sower God never gives up on us and calls us to take risks and be equally generous in mission. Then last week with the parable of the weeds growing among the wheat the surprise was that the farmer said to not pluck the weeds but to wait and see. He instructs the servants to let them grow together. Being judgmental is not part of our job description. We are as the parable is best translated, to “forgive them to grow together until the harvest.”





And now today we have the Kingdom of Heaven compared to a Mustard Seed. In this one sentence parable, Jesus says ... *“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*



So, what does a mustard tree in Israel look like? It is most likely that Jesus was talking about a black mustard, **brassica nigra**, which is native to tropical regions of North Africa.¹ The seeds are tiny, about 2mm diameter. Not actually the smallest of all seeds, but certainly one in the range of small seeds. In fertile soil, black mustard can reach up to 8 to 10 ft tall with the stem as thick as an arm. It is an annual plant, with yellow flowers and long seed pods. The seeds germinate overnight. It is typically grown in the wild.



A man called David Hall took these photographs in the Holy Land and wrote a bit about mustard.² David pointed out that when multiple plants grow in close proximity it is dense enough to provide cover for birds from their enemies such as hawks and owls. Although these branches look spindly, they can grow thick so they support bird nests.



The tree Jesus is talking about in this parable is NOT some big imposing ancient oak tree or a majestic cedar tree. **A mustard seed is a strange choice to be comparing to the Kingdom of Heaven. What a surprise! Why choose a shrub?** Mustard is fast-growing and hard to get rid of! It is invasive (like mint/bamboo). It is a weed, a lowly choice.

Mustard in the Holy Land grew wild. Farmers did not typically cultivate it or sow whole fields with it. To mix it with other crops would break the Jewish purity laws. In Leviticus 19:19, *You must keep my rules. Do not crossbreed your livestock, **do not plant your field with two kinds of seed, and do not wear clothes made from two kinds of material.***



In California, when I think about mustard, it is the vineyards that come to mind. You probably think of wine-making with a scene like this with rows of vines. But in the spring when vines have dropped their leaves and been pruned back then there's a variety of mustard that is grown between rows of vines as a cover crop. It is grown for its nitrogen, it wards away pests, helps with drainage and erosion control, attracts certain insects, and self-seeds. It is a helpful thing to grow.



Mustard also has valuable properties for healing and for seasoning food. *Pliny, a Roman author, naturalist and philosopher died around 79AD wrote that it was used for bites and stings, counteracts fungi, phlem (kept in mouth, or gargled), toothache (chewed), romotes menstruation and urine. It even Relaxes bowels.*³ As Thomas Steagald pointed out in a commentary that I read this week: God is determined to give the constipated world an enema!⁴

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brassica_nigra.

² <https://dqhall59.com/israelphotosIV/mustard.htm>

³ <http://www.seedsofshalom.com/2008/07/mustard-mustard-and-more-mustard.html> (accessed July 2011).

⁴ Thomas Steagald in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. *Feasting on the Gospels--Matthew*, Volume 1: A Feasting on the Word Commentary. Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.



Joking aside, **what is Jesus telling us about the Kingdom of God? Why is the Kingdom of God like a mustard seed good news for us?**

1. Good news because mustard is a **lowly plant**. We tend to measure success by those with the largest seed or flashiest fruit. Here Jesus is saying that the insignificant matter and they can make a difference. God values the mustard seed. What is of value to God, is what we think of as a weed.
2. Good news because the mustard bush **disrupts the orderly fields through its unchecked presence**, through its invasiveness and ability to spread. We want to sow things in rows and keep things in order. The Kingdom of God invades our ordered lives and upturns things and says other folk matter too.
3. Good news because letting mustard grow and flourish is **subverting convention**. Mustard is not highly regarded. As an invasive weed, it should be weeded out of field and burned. But in the Kingdom of God, weeds are valued. All plants or all lives matter, but especially those that others want to stamp out.
4. Good news because mustard **brings health and healing**. The Kingdom of God is a place of wholeness, where all can come and ingest that which can produce good health, and be healed from a variety of ailments.
5. Good news because mustard **nourishes others and provides shelter and protection**. The Kof G is a place where life flourishes, where those who are small and insignificant matter and can make a difference. It is a place for the birds to find space & protection. It is life-giving.

Thomas Steagald went on to say: *The **hope** is this: that from God's perspective the kingdom of God does not look only like big glass churches ... but like scruffy shrubs here and there—unattractive and unappealing, except to those birds that need shelter and shade. Mustard shrubs may be unwelcome to those cultivating a different kind of field, but they are celebrated by those who need just what they have to offer—room in their branches.*⁵

So who are we offering room to?

Trees were used in the Old Testament to signify empires, and that is what we expect God's powerful empire to look like. It would not have been surprising for Jesus to say the Kingdom of God is like a cedar tree. But Jesus has a different message, one that is surprising and disrupts our thoughts.

So, what about you personally? What is disrupting your life? What do you want to uproot? What are the invasive weeds in your life, and can they be life-giving? **What if what you most want to be rid of might nourish you and heal you?** Song by Laura Story called "Blessings" The lyrics go like this:

*We pray for blessings, we pray for peace
Comfort for family, protection while we sleep
We pray for healing, for prosperity
We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering*

⁵ Thomas Steagald in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Feasting on the Gospels--Matthew, Volume 1: A Feasting on the Word Commentary. Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

*... what if Your blessings come through raindrops?
What if Your healing comes through tears
... What if trials of this life
Are Your mercies in disguise?*

*We pray for wisdom, Your voice to hear
We cry in anger when we cannot feel You near
... When friends betray us, when darkness seems to win
... What if my greatest disappointments
Or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst
This world can't satisfy?
And what if trials of this life
The rain, the storms, the hardest nights
Are Your mercies in disguise?⁶*

I would add what if this time of isolation and pandemic, this trying time, is being used to bring us God's mercies? We see Kingdom of God as being anywhere except where weeds are. Maybe what we most want to be rid of nourishes us. Perhaps the weeds and disorder in our lives is actually growth. So, hold onto the vision of the mustard bush that Jesus painted and wrestle with it for a while.

I remember time in my life about 15 years ago... *Tell story of our neighbors building a 'shed' that destroyed the view from our yard, and the feeling of powerlessness as procedures in place were not followed. Injustice.* But it led to my involvement in the approval systems, that led to neighbors working together for the benefit of all. Also led to a change in my understanding of how unjust systems can be and how they hold people in place, I also began to understand the place of faith and politics. More recently, it has helped me get a grip on structural racism. And so the weed-like disruption in my life became a plant that nourished me.

As we embrace the weeds in our lives, dangers, hurts, bruises and disappointments, we will discover that they can be mustard bushes that bring the wonderful hopeful, healing, expansive, disruptive Kingdom of God into our lives.



The power of the tiny mustard seed speaks of the great hope and faith we hold onto. Let us remember the Kingdom of God is here and is coming everywhere that we experience the tiny scandalous invasive mustard seed growing and bringing healing, nourishment and abundant life to all.

Let anyone with ears listen!
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Series Description

The word parabola literally translates "to throw beside". A closely related word is parable, a story that is not true, but true-like, or "thrown beside" the truth. Jesus taught in parables, and they are full of wisdom that is masterfully woven in story form. In this sermon series, we are examining three farming parables about planting seeds from Matthew 13 to see what truths we can uncover on the wayside about faith, life, and the Kingdom of God.

⁶ <http://www.lyricshall.com/lyrics/Laura+Story/Blessings/>