



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Mustard...Seriously?

Sermon preached at eleven o'clock service, June 17, 2018

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Mark 4:26 and Ezekiel 17:22-24

This past Friday, I took advantage of the gorgeous weather to visit the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. A few stops on Metro North, and you walk right into a lush green landscape, with the most amazing trees. All kinds of trees—some huge and old with limbs themselves as big as trees, some tiny and delicate, some downright odd. The rose garden was in full, luxuriant bloom. There is far more than you can see in an afternoon or even a day. For whatever time you have, you'll find an island of green and quiet and peace. A welcome respite from the busy-ness of the city and from the busy-ness of the news.

I learned that the tallest tree in the Garden's 250 acres is a tulip poplar. It's 155 feet high, roughly the height of a 15-story building. (St. Bart' dome is 11 stories high.) Later, in the gift shop, I discovered many small plants for sale—a beautiful profusion of dark greens, light greens, some with colored flowers blooming, all different kinds. I also found some seed packets—one with seeds for flowers that attract butterflies, one with seeds for flowers that attract bees. I bought both as a gift for my niece, who loves growing and tending plants. The whole garden experience gave me great joy!

I didn't consciously decide to go to the Garden because of our readings today. But after arriving home from the Garden, I wondered if reading and reflecting on this week's scriptures about seeds and sprigs and trees and shrubs may have had more influence than I realized.

The kingdom of God 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, he does not know how. This parable appears only here, in the Gospel of Mark. At first hearing, this parable seems, well, underwhelming. Someone scatters seed, and the seed sprouts and grows. Well, yes. Isn't that what seeds do? This is not the more famous/colorful parable about seed falling on different kinds of soil—on rocks, on the path, among thorns, into good soil.

In this simple parable, seed is scattered, and it sprouts and grows. The kingdom of God—which we might understand not as a geographic area but as the power emanating from God—is like a seed sprouting and growing?

The second parable: *The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet ... 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.* The kingdom of God—the power emanating from God—is like mustard? Surely the kingdom of God—the power emanating from God—would be more like a tall, noble cedar of Lebanon, growing 100 feet high, planted on a lofty mountain.

But ... mustard ?? If you've ever traveled to California's wine country in early spring, you may have seen the fluorescent/highlighter-yellow flowers growing between the rows of grapevines. Those yellow flowers belong to mustard plants. Mustard is called "the winemaker's friend." Many vineyard owners plant mustard deliberately as a cover crop or let field mustard run rampant, because they can plow it back into the soil. It makes a great fertilizer, rich in nitrogen. Mustard also repels some insects harmful to the vines. It also attracts certain insects—"beneficial predators"—that attack vine-chewing insects.

Just so you know: mustard seed contains no cholesterol, only trace amounts of vegetable fat, and about 25 percent protein. Mustard leaves contain calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, and Vitamin B. Calories are negligible. [1]

Jesus likely didn't go into all that. What Jesus' audience would have known, and what's still true in our time: Mustard is a common plant. It's invasive. It will take over. It's a weed, kind of like dandelions (or like kudzu, if you're from the South). It's hardy, stubborn. It thrives in all kinds of conditions.

Jesus was a funny guy. Great sense of irony. He tells the crowd: Mustard's the greatest of all ... shrubs. The noble cedar: 100 feet. Mustard: maybe 10 feet on a good day. Its branches may have provided some shade and safety, but those branches would have been rather spindly, precarious for nests.

Parables are stories that sound simple on the surface, but they are intended to disturb, to shake us up, to shake us loose from our assumptions.

Recently I needed to travel from the Upper East Side all the way downtown. I decided to take the new-ish Q train to Union Square and change there to the 4/5 downtown. So I rode the Q, walked the short distance through the Union Square station (where I've been walking for 30 years), got on the 4/5, and resumed reading my magazine, which maybe I was too engrossed in. After a while, I was hearing stops whose names I didn't recognize. I got off the train and stood on the platform seeing nothing familiar. I figured I must have taken an uptown train by mistake, so I got on the next train going in the other direction. But after a stop or two, I realized that was wrong, too. I still did not know where I was. Eventually I did find the right train, but I have to tell you, that experience shook me up. I am someone with an excellent sense of direction, even in places I've never been before, and I have 30 years' experience riding the NYC subways, especially the 4/5/6 line. I almost

never experience that kind of complete disorientation, especially in my own city! It was a momentary, but powerful, experience of dislocation.

In much that same way, possibly more gently, parables are intended to dis-locate us, to disturb, to shake us up, to shake us loose from our assumptions. They invite us to see our world in a different way. And Jesus was a master teller of parables.

I wonder: what assumptions might Jesus have been trying to shake up for those who heard him? Didn't they assume that their messiah would be a conquering king? Surely as a descendant of David (that's the tender sprig image from Ezekiel), David's descendent would come in power and might, riding in on a war horse, vanquishing oppressors, re-establishing Israel as a powerful nation, a noble cedar on a high mountain for all to see.

Surely the messiah would not be a person born to poor parents in the middle of nowhere, someone who rode a donkey, a person who healed lepers and ate with sinners and tax collectors and outcasts, someone who preached crazy things like "love your enemies." Surely not!

Surely God's power would be like the noble cedar, not like a common weed, an invasive plant that just keeps stubbornly growing and spreading.

Back to that first simple parable: Surely the spread of God's kingdom depends heavily on our own efforts, our own smarts and hard work. Surely we can make God's kingdom come, or at least hasten the coming of God's kingdom by working harder and smarter.

God's power is like a seed planted, spouting and growing, we do not know how. Well, actually, we now do know how. We have learned the science of that now. We even know how to re-engineer and modify seeds and clone things. But the actual process of growing life ... that is God's. The actual change in someone's heart ... that is God's.

This does NOT let us off the hook! We aren't just to kick back with the remote, or put our heads in the sand, or lie on the sofa and eat bon-bons, waiting for God to do everything. The seed did have to get sown ... and harvested. And in between, likely watered and weeded and fertilized. But the growth, the mysterious miraculous growth, is God's doing.

God's power is the power of *life* in all its forms.

God's power can be as dramatic as the birth of a baby or the birth of a new star.

God's power can be as quiet as a tired woman refusing to sit at the back of a bus.

Or as simple as a church putting up a Pride flag.

God's power can be as invisible as a woman in Michigan who takes in and gives a home, however temporary, to a 3-year-old boy whose father was arrested at the border and who is now alone in the world. [2]

God's power can be as private as the change of one heart.

The power of God is *life* in all its forms. God's new order: it was new then, and it's still new today. God's new order will take root and spread, regardless. God's new order is taking root and spreading now, even in these times of ours.

We may want to be careful when we pray, "thy kingdom come." Because "...God's seeds will rise with the disruptive energy of resurrection, maybe even insurrection." [3]

[1] <http://www.vegetablegardener.com/item/3477/how-to-grow-mustard/page/all>

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/07/us/children-immigration-borders-family-separation.html>

[3] I am indebted to Jeanne Choy Tate for this powerful sentence and image. *The Christian Century*, Living the Word by Jeanne Choy Tate, May 15, 2018: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/june-17-ordinary-11b-mark-426-34>

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