

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 30, 2017 – Summer Parables
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Thomas 20 (The Five Gospels)

FOR REFLECTION

"Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible, Thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habit. Thought is great and swift and free."

BERTRAND RUSSELL, BRITISH PHILOSOPHER (1872-1970)

Mythical Mustard

1 The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what Heaven's imperial rule is like."

2 He said to them,

**It's like a mustard seed. 3 (It's) the smallest of all seeds,
4 but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant
and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky.**

Heaven's Imperial Rule, God's Domain, Kingdom of God – this is what Jesus is credited for announcing and bringing to Israel 2000 years ago. This tiny parable (much like the tiny seed it references) is believed to have originated with Jesus and told in a variety of ways in the various gospels Matthew 13: 131-32, Luke 13:18-19, Mark 4:30-32 – each changing the details to fit their circumstances. Thomas 20 is believed to be closest to the original form.

It has since been interpreted variously, depending on the agenda of the teller. Jesus, as we understand him, loved to defy the expectations of his audience. God's Domain would normally be compared to something great, not something small and insignificant. Two biblical images that would be foremost in the minds of his listeners would be:

The mighty cedar of Lebanon as a metaphor for a towering empire (Ezekiel 17:22-23); and that of the **apocalyptic tree** of Daniel 4:12,20-22. In Daniel, the crown of the tree reaches to heaven and its branches next the birds of the sky.

The Five Gospels p.484

Jesus is being funny here.

This is parody...God's Domain was a modest affair, not a new world empire. It was pervasive but unrecognized, rather than noisy and arresting.

The Five Gospels p.484

The message is also "anti-social" as it:

Endorses counter movements and ridicules established tradition.

The Five Gospels p.484

I've talked in the past about the subversive message of planting mustard in "prepared soil" or established fields. Mustard is a weed that is difficult to eradicate. Sowing these tiny pests into a landowner's fields sabotages the enterprise – subverting the economic establishment.

But there is more than one message here – and I want to unpack some of the other metaphors – present and absent in this one-sentence bomb. Lebanon sits at the northern border of Israel. It was well-known through trade that the Cedars of Lebanon were a precious hardwood sought by ship-builders and other woodworkers around the world.

The Cedar is a symbol of holiness, eternity and peace. As an emblem of longevity, the cedar of Lebanon has its origin in many biblical references. The cedar of Lebanon is mentioned seventy-seven times in the Bible, especially in the book Psalms chapter 92 verse 12 where it says that "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree, He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon" and Chapter 104, verse 16, where it is stated: "[t]he trees of the Lord are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Lebanon

The wood produced from [this tree] was characterized as strong, being capable of holding heavy loads. Its strength could also be supported by its versatility. Resins from the cedar trees were used for burial rituals and for medicinal purposes for some people...

In Egypt, during the Eighteenth Dynasty, economic prosperity smiled upon the land of the Pharaohs. Trade flourished...demands for ships, used for both trade and war, rose...ship builders looked upon the cedar wood of Lebanon as the primary material to use...Resins from the Lebanese cedar tree were equally important and well-known as its wood. **Lebanese cedar resins were then used during the mummification of many rich and powerful individuals in Egypt. Afterwards, the body was then placed in a coffin made of, once again, Lebanese cedar wood.**

The Hittites and Assyrians utilized...[it] to make chariots for the war machines of the respective civilizations. **The Israelites also used it...Moses, for example, said that its resins could be used to cure leprosy. King Solomon...used the Lebanese hardwood for the construction of his huge and grand temple dedicated to [YHWH].** The Persian [Empire], used also the wood for their magnificent structures. In the great palace of Persepolis, the Lebanese cedar wood was used as pillars to hold the roof and as roof beams to hold the ceiling. <https://searchinginhistory.blogspot.com/2014/04/symbol-of-lebanon-in-ancient-world.html>

So, by NOT comparing God's Domain to the Cedar tree – Jesus critiques the hubris and entitlement of the wealthy, empire-building and war-mongering of both Jews and Gentiles.

By using the metaphor of the mustard seed and its annual plant, Jesus introduces a world of thought rooted in ancient India.

...mustard...seeds originated in India and are only about 1-2 millimeters in diameter...

One of the earliest religious references to the mustard seed was made in the 5th Century by Buddha. He told a story of a mother who was grieving over the death of her son. She went to Buddha to find a way to bring her son back to life. Buddha told the mother to bring him a handful of mustard seeds from a family who had never lost a family member to death. She searched for such a family but soon realized that everyone has had to face death...

Jewish texts compare the original creation of the universe to the size of a mustard seed. They believe that the universe started out really small but has continued to grow since its creation. From small things are great things brought to pass.

Article Source: <http://EzineArticles.com/6471255>

(Perhaps the Big Bang Theory is rooted in this same mythical mustard metaphor...)

It is no mistake that in hearing this metaphor later Christians interpreted the parable to refer to the smallness of the early Jesus movement and the subsequent church institution that grew from it. And the idea that great faith grows from a tiny seed would be a natural conclusion.

Archeological excavations in the **Indus Valley (Indian Subcontinent)** have revealed that mustard was cultivated there. (That civilization existed until about 1800 BC.)

Now get this:

The Romans were probably the first to experiment with the preparation of mustard as a condiment. They mixed unfermented grape juice (the must) with ground mustard seeds (called sinapis) to make "burning must", mustum ardens — hence "must ard".

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard_\(condiment\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard_(condiment))

If mustard was a big Roman Thing – the idea of God taking the elements of empire and subverting them to divine purpose deepens the parable considerably.

Just for fun, I will also note that:

An archaic name for the seed is **eye of newt**. Often misunderstood for an actual eye of a newt, this name has been popularly associated with witchcraft ever since it was mentioned as an ingredient to a witch's brew in Shakespeare's famous play Macbeth.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard_seed

And then, lest we forget, there are the “birds of the air” or “birds of the sky” that take shelter in God’s Domain. Again, there is a variety of interpretations:

“Birds of the air” is a phrase used by the prophets that referred to the Gentiles and people who lived in nations beyond Israel’s borders. Jesus is telling us more than just how the kingdom will grow; he’s telling us who is invited...Jesus presents us with a grand vision of the Kingdom of Heaven, a place where people from all nations will gather to find a home and celebrate God’s goodness together.

http://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/2030/

The nesting birds may refer to Old Testament texts which emphasize the universal reach of God's empire, such as Daniel 4:12. However, **a real mustard plant is unlikely to attract nesting birds, so that "Jesus seems deliberately to emphasize the notion of astonishing extravagance in his analogy."** Other commentators have suggested that the birds represent **Gentiles seeking refuge with Israel**** or the "sinners" and tax collectors with whom Jesus was criticized for associating.

* Richard N. Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, Eerdmans, 2000, ISBN 0-8028-4638-6, p. 141.

* Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, Continuum, 2006, ISBN 0-567-04473-4, pp. 73–77.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Mustard_Seed

So – what can we take from this tiny parable?

- * Faith and hope, church institutions and subversive movements, flora, fauna and universes grow from tiny beginnings.
- * God’s Domain is more like a weed than an empire – arriving under the expectations of social norms.
- * Outsiders can take shelter here – such as it is.
- * Stories and metaphors have unimaginable power.

- * Add whatever you are thinking....

Scripture Reading for Sunday July 30, 2017 – Pentecost 8 – Year A

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Ezekiel 31

31 In the eleventh year, in the third month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me: ²Mortal, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his hordes: Whom are you like in your greatness?

³ Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds.

⁴ The waters nourished it, the deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow around the place where it was planted, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the field.

⁵ So it towered high above all the trees of the field; its boughs grew large and its branches long, from abundant water in its shoots.

⁶ All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the animals of the field gave birth to their young; and in its shade all great nations lived.

⁷ It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; for its roots went down to abundant water.

⁸ The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs; the plane trees were as nothing compared with its branches; no tree in the garden of God was like it in beauty.

⁹ I made it beautiful with its mass of branches, the envy of all the trees of Eden that were in the garden of God.

¹⁰ Therefore, thus says the Lord God: Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, ¹¹I gave it into the hand of the prince of the nations; he has dealt with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. ¹²Foreigners from the most terrible of the nations have cut it down and left it. On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs lie broken in all the watercourses of the land; and all the peoples of the earth went away from its

shade and left it.

¹³ On its fallen trunk settle
all the birds of the air,
and among its boughs lodge
all the wild animals.

¹⁴ All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to lofty height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For all of them are handed over to death,
to the world below;
along with all mortals,
with those who go down to the Pit.

¹⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day it went down to Sheol I closed the deep over it and covered it; I restrained its rivers, and its mighty waters were checked. I clothed Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field fainted because of it. ¹⁶ I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the Pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that were well watered, were consoled in the world below. ¹⁷ They also went down to Sheol with it, to those killed by the sword, along with its allies, those who lived in its shade among the nations.

¹⁸ Which among the trees of Eden was like you in glory and in greatness? Now you shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below; you shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are killed by the sword. This is Pharaoh and all his horde, says the Lord GOD.