

Weeds and all

Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector, at the eleven o'clock service, July 24, 2011, The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost. Based on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52.

Correct me if I'm wrong. Somewhere along life's winding roads, you've heard of the mustard seed. Maybe it was in church, but it could have been anywhere. The tiny parable of the tiny seed is ubiquitous.

And it's simplicity itself:

Someone took a mustard seed 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. (Matt. 13.31)

And it's about growth, right?

I've always thought so, and I'm sure I've preached and taught this parable as telling us that life, and faith, and—if you're a professional like me, the church, for God's sake—begins small and gets big, improbably small to improbably large.

Then there's the other reference to the mustard seed: "Truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (Luke 17.6)

I know I've given to more than one charity with "mustard seed" in its title, or in its appeal letter. "We may be small, but God will prosper us. Watch how we grow when you give." "Your small gift can grow. Combined with others' gifts, it will help us build a big _____ (you fill in the blank)."

I think I'm right about how familiar the mustard seed idea is, and about what we all think it means.

But I'm beginning to think I'm wrong about the parable.

Not long ago I was doing some chores and half-listening to a radio talk show about gardening. As a very occasional and mostly aspirational gardener, it was just interesting enough to keep half-listening. But then I really tuned in when the discussion turned to weeds. A caller wanted to know the best way to rid her garden of something she called "an invasive species." That set off a discussion between the host and the expert guest on just what an invasive species is, and that led to a definition of a weed.

"Ah," the expert said. "I weed is what I say is a weed."

Or, as the dictionary amplifies:

Weed, n., A wild plant growing where it is not wanted and in competition with cultivated plants; any plant that crowds out cultivated plants.

Remember the dialogue in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*?

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Yes, that is the question. Here I am trying to get to what Jesus meant by a brief parable; that is, I'm trying to get some information on the table about the realities of his world so we can get some context and therefore understanding of the meaning in our own.

But information can get us only so far. Education is not necessarily conversion, and conversion is what we need. Transformation, not just information, is what it will take if we think life is just about becoming masters, or drawing lines, or labeling species.

The *information* you need is this: Jesus deliberately used an invasive species, a wild, strongly tasting weed called mustard to illustrate how God wants the world to be.

Transformation would mean that you can live with that kind of world.

Again, here's a fuller definition:

A weed in a general sense is a plant that is considered by the user of the term to be a nuisance, and normally applied to unwanted plants in human-controlled settings, especially farm fields and gardens, but also lawns, parks, woods, and other areas. More specifically, the term is often used to describe native or nonnative plants that grow and reproduce aggressively. [Janick, Jules (1979). *Horticultural Science* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: W.H. Freeman. p. 308.]

Generally, a weed is a plant in an undesired place.

This isn't just modern botanical science. A contemporary of Jesus, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder wrote:

Mustard ... with its pungent taste and fiery effect is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild . . . but *when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it.*

And the scholar Dominic Crossan points out that, after noting the way in which mustard plants tend to proliferate in both field and garden with negative results for both, the Mishnah, a collection of instructions by rabbinic sages c. 200 a.d., ordered careful regulation of mustard cultivation. Crossan cites with approval Douglas Oakman's observation: "It is hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus deliberately likens the rule of God to a weed."

There it is: the kingdom of God is like a weed that won't stay out of cultivated places. The kingdom of God is like a coming time when we won't know what *cultivated* means. The kingdom of God will be wildly interesting because the pungent will be mixed with the bland, the insiders will have to learn how to welcome the outsiders.

History is littered with the tragic consequences of not being able to live with wild weeds and the mixing of species. Even the great religions have become more interested in weeding out than including in. An atrocity like that apparently committed by just one man in Norway, one who calls himself a conservative Christian, shouldn't condemn a whole religion, any more than specific acts by "Islamist" terrorists should condemn Islam as a whole. But such monstrous acts should certainly make those of us who practice a religion keep in touch with our better angels and not our inner demons.

The real weeding that has to take place is not to keep people who are not like us out of our churches. People who are not like us out of our multi-cultural societies in this global village. *The weeding we need to do is within.*

The kingdom time Jesus envisioned is a time when people will first and primarily be interested in their inner core of being. When they'll spend time on the quality of their own souls, rather than in obsessively patrolling the boundaries, neurotically trying to keep the weeds out, or to keep everything the way it was.

Obviously not everything is good for the soil. So, don't become parable literalists. But if we knew where things were going, if we grew more and more in touch with how the human family needs to find ways to live together, this parable would not feel remote or charming or even overly mysterious. It would call us.

Beginning at midnight last night, people who had been excluded from marriage were rejoicing all over the State of New York. Think of it. It's like an outsider trying to come to church. People wanting the most traditional thing we have to offer. But because we had spent so much time patrolling boundaries, so much time trying to keep things the way they were—whatever that means—we were doing the weeding in the wrong place.

The kingdom, weeds and all, begins with us.

Jesus taught and fought and healed and loved and lived and died and told a pungent parable to welcome the kingdom—all of it weeds.

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