

June 18, 2006
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MARK 4: 26-34

MUSTARD SEED PARABLE
Mary Hall

I've been having a go at subduing the Japanese Knotweed, sometimes known as bamboo, that's growing like a jungle along the stream edges and roadside by my house. I'm sure many of you have engaged in similar kinds of tasks that seem at once boring and difficult. While I was doing this, I was contemplating the passage from Mark about Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, in preparation for today's message. I began to wonder how it was I could loathe this Japanese Knotweed and hack at it with a vengeance while thinking of the excellence of the mustard seed that is like the kingdom of God. After all, Japanese Knotweed too could proliferate from a tiny fragment of a stem into a massive and overpowering plant; so too, Jesus tells us that the mustard seed is "smaller than all the seeds on earth" yet it grows into the largest of herbs with many branches in which the birds may nest and of which the farmer may take harvest. I puzzled upon this seeming contradiction between these two plants, one which we want to exterminate and the other to which we feel grateful. I have even had conversations with people unfamiliar with the Japanese Knotweed story who wonder at our local zealotry over plants that after all do have such lovely white blossoms.

Aha! I thought. That's it.

It's the fact that the mustard seeds nurture and provide shelter for those that live on the earth... sustaining the farmer and sheltering the birds. Japanese Knotweed, on the other hand, nurtures nothing and, indeed, drives out the plants that do provide nourishment and shelter. That's why we want to get rid of it... because it gobbles up everything in its way and leaves nothing for any other living creatures. We want to get rid of it so that the flowers and birds and animals may flourish, so that the mustard seeds may grow.

And that is the power of parable.

Mark says that Jesus “did not speak to them except in parables.” It was the parable that led me to the realization about the knotweed. Jesus did not say this explicitly but the story that he tells about the mustard seed leads us to explore aspects of our experience and brings us to new understandings.

The contemporary definition of a parable, that I read in the American heritage dictionary, is “a simple story illustrating a moral or religious lesson,” but, its more ancient usage comes from the Greek having to do with “to compare” and “to throw.”

And, we can see that the mustard seed story is a comparison, an analogy. The kingdom of God is like a plant that has certain characteristics – it has a very small seed that is scattered broadly and that sprouts and grows a stem and branches and a head and grain. And it provides nourishment and shelter for the living things of the earth. The farmer doesn’t know how this happens but he lives in within its pattern.

Just so, the kingdom of God cannot be described scientifically or precisely in the sense of engineering or biology. Yet the power of the parable leads us to extend ourselves beyond what we know evidentially, to what we might experience even so, even without that knowledge. Jesus wants his listeners to know that they will experience the kingdom of God, but they will never know it in its totality for it is of God, infinite and beyond the ability of man to comprehend. Jesus tells this story because he wants the kingdom of God to have some kind of reality, but it is complex and subtle, stretching beyond where our minds can really go. He wants people to know that it has the characteristics of growth, of infinite capacity from minute beginnings, of generosity and nourishment, but also that they can never know the totality.

Parables seem to start with something concrete and familiar, like the mustard seed would have been to Jesus’ listeners. But then they lead to broader and deeper comparisons and questions, bringing the reader or listener ever more deeply into the contemplation and exploration of the mystery. Here is the aspect of the word parable meaning “to throw.” We

are extending or “throwing” the sense of the story to include or allude to things far beyond what we can actually know, but that stretch our imagination and spirit.

This is also why we may come to a deeper understanding of our world and the things in it through stories of all kinds. John Updike, one of our most prolific writers, in discussing the power of poetry and literature, says, “The special value of these indirect methods of communication – as opposed to the value of factual reporting and analysis – is one of precision. It brings us closer to the actual texture and intricacy of experience.” That is to say that, the facts, ma’am, may not give us an adequate sense of reality. They confine it and do not necessarily reflect reality. We can understand more by letting the “throwing” ability of stories take us to new places.

To a place, for instance, where the kingdom of God, the love of God, can start as a very small seed within us and spread and grow so that we are nourished and sheltered by it even though we do not really know what it is. For it is not a thing that we can own through purchase, a bit of knowledge that we can acquire through study, a habit that we can develop through practice. Without it we would be solitary, narrow individuals, concerned only with our own needs and pleasures. With it, there is no limit to the extent of our spirit. Like nature, we can only participate in it but we cannot totally explain it or define it. The love of God that Jesus speaks of is infinitely large, yet it can be sensed in something as small as a mustard seed. As long as we give it room to expand within us, as long as we do not try to own it through rational understanding, through ego and will, it will lead us to largeness of spirit, to relationship with one another and the world around us, that is more than we could imagine without that little mustard seed.

Why does Mark say that Jesus “does not speak to them except in parables?” Because Jesus knew that they and we need the “throwing” ability of the parable to make us open to the Kingdom so that it can sprout and grow within us. Because we, just like those people in Galilee want to try and count and define and analyze and narrow all that we come upon

so that we can own it. But parables and stories lead us onward, every questioning, ever searching, keeping our eyes and ears and minds and hearts open to where they might point. We may never reap quantifiable reward from it, but it is immensely important that we stretch out and follow that lead so that our lives have meaning beyond their concrete details.

The gift of parable is not confined to the walls of the church. The gift of parable speaks even to those who do not think of themselves as religious beings. The adage of Voltaire, an exponent of the age of reason, speaks just to this sense of blessing with meaning even the smallest aspects of our lives. He said, “How infinitesimal is the importance of anything that I can do, but how infinitely important it is that I should do it.” That is what parable does... it says that even the smallest events may be pathways to the infinite and marvelous.

Parable can make even the stupefyingly frustrating task of whacking the Japanese Knotweed an opportunity for a tiny revelation. So, I think that I’ll keep at it. And, listeners, I have, every year at least since 2006.