

Denice K. Leslie
11th after Pentecost
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Matthew 13: 31- 33, 44- 52



When we were serving in the Napa Valley there was nothing lovelier than driving up valley in the early spring and seeing the vineyards filled with flowering yellow mustard.

We lived in a parsonage in St. Helena that backed up against an ancient vineyard. The vines were spaced singly—they weren't strung out on wires up off the ground as today's vines are. Their gnarled old trunks, leafy vines and dusty purple grape clusters were literally within arms reach of our waist high back fence. And growing in the garden bed in front of that fence was a mustard tree—from a mustard seed from the Holy Land. And it was just tall enough—about five feet high-- for birds to build a nest in.



I love this parable of Jesus about the mustard seed. Growing up as a child I was always taught that this was a parable about faith—that just a little faith can grow into a strong faith—big as a

tree! And for a long, long time one of my favorite necklaces was of a mustard seed encased in a small glass bubble on a chain.

It's nice to think of this story Jesus tells us that way—a little seed—Matthew says “the smallest seed of all”—growing into a strong tree like a mighty oak growing from a little acorn.



But that's not what this story is about at all. Nope. It's about a weed. A weed no farmer in his right mind wants in his or her field because it's a big nuisance—the mustard isn't exactly a tree as we know trees either—its more of a big bush that is big enough to nest in. And this mustard Jesus speaks about has invasive roots—hard to root out. Like the maples or Texas privet trees that volunteer all over the valley around here, especially out here in front of the church in the beds in front of our adobe walls—a pain in the back!

Why on earth would Jesus tell us the Kingdom of heaven is like a weed a farmer *chose* to plant in his own field? I mean this isn't like the parable of the wheat and the tares—although it follows close after it –you remember that story: how an enemy sows tares in a wheat field of a neighbor but it's too risky to tear them out because you can't tell the wheat from the weed! Any good farmer who heard Jesus tell that story would instantly feel the force of the dilemma of what action to take.

You know what? That's the purpose of a parable. A parable isn't an allegory, or a fable or even simply a story with a moral. It's a dilemma—it's told to make us squirm at the unexpected turn of events and consider a course of action and then take action.

Jesus' purpose is to get folks to see things God's way and not just from the usual, everyday, status quo way—the assumed way.

As in the parable I was talking about of the wheat and the tares—the first assumption is that the farmer will go right in and pull out the weeds. But Jesus reminds his listeners, the wheat and weeds are so much alike the experienced farmer will let them grow together until the seed head opens revealing their true identity and THEN separate them out.

If the farmer didn't wait—he could do as much damage as the weeds in ruining his crop!

The course of action in this case is to tend both the good and the bad together nurturing both with TLC until the harvest.

As for today's parable about the mustard seed, it's the first of a group of parables whose purpose is show us what the Kingdom of God is all about. He says, "The Kingdom of God is like... a mustard seed—a weed a farmer chooses to plant in his own field.

The kingdom of God is like yeast used as leavening for bread... The kingdom of God is like a merchant who falls in love with one great pearl and sells off everything he has to own it. The kingdom of God is like a net thrown into the sea that comes out with a big catch of fish—a big mix of *every kind*.

The picture we are getting here is one of disorder and irrationality and a bit of chaos. Uncontrolled growth, passion beyond common sense, indiscriminately embracing all kinds of folks!

You see Jews understood creation to be a very ordered place with a definite hierarchy to creation and a defined purpose as the chosen people of God. So it was very offensive to talk about a farmer who would knowingly grow a weed in his own field—that would disorder the creation as God has created it. It's *dishonoring* of creation and of the Creator. This Jesus had a way of upsetting the fruit basket completely!



The leaven-or the yeast—its suspect, like a germ thing. Yes it had its use but it was basically an unclean thing. Certainly not something to be lifted up as an example.

After all when you bake the bread there's no evidence of the smelly, gaseous little creepy organisms left. And the business man who went hog wild for the big pearl has a screw loose—what's his clan or family going to do for a future?

But that mixed catch of fish takes the cake! Talk about unclean. That smacks too much of pagans and gentiles and Jews and Samaritans all mixing together: the righteous and the unrighteous rubbing shoulders!

How can God be like this? Or want us to be like this? An invasive weed, a fixated pearl merchant, that foul fermentation? Or mixing with all those people not like ourselves? Pretty startling if you are a Jew. Pretty startling for us today to if we think of these things in terms of our own categories of weedierness, or classes of unacceptable people God doesn't approve of.

How can God love like this? For the love of it? For the grace of it?

And then lets not forget there is that foreboding ending about how the angels will come and separate out the good fish from the bad and that bit about how a good housekeeper knows when to use something brand new and when to bring out the old tried and true.

It's hard to know how to get our footing here—where we can stand on solid ground. The ground shifts into new places when Jesus speaks. There are no simple rules, just this big

overwhelming sense of challenging the accepted and being open to where God's love leads us next and leaving the final results, and any final judgments up to God. And that is exactly as Jesus intends for us to do: not rely on ourselves, but rely on God.



Think about it. Mustard goes good with a lot of things! Pastrami for one. Wieners and sauerkraut for another! A mustard poultice was a sure cure for a stuffy chest and head cold not so long ago. A healing balm.

Fermentation gives us wonderful breads, yogurts and cheese and breaks down all kinds of pollutants and gives us medicines. Stalking with a fixation that which is truly noble is certainly not the most irresponsible thing one can do. And embracing folks with total abandon, even folks we don't understand, whose life styles are different from ours, whose personalities or habits strike us as strange....

I remember a parishioner in a former church who had thick, long matted grey hair and uneven teeth. This woman was well educated, very intelligent. Wrote great poems. But her personal habits drove other women crazy and they complained, fearful they would get lice if they sat next to her in church.

I remember a parishioner in this congregation who made anatomically correct dolls—stitching away on their nude stuffed little bodies in worship, in Sunday School classes to the distraction and grief of many, and boy did the consternation and the gossip go round! But the rest of that family's story, as many of you know,

is even more surprising...Yet God clearly brought them our way.

Yesterday Dee reminded me of how she and Lorraine May were walking back to their hotel very late after the Bishop's retirement celebration at annual conference when these two very scruffy men approached them on the dark street, positioning themselves on either side of them and asking them where they were going.

Pretty spooked, and anxiety growing by the second, Lorraine and Dee said they were just going to their hotel across the street as they made haste to do so—and the scruffy guys went right along with them, directly to their hotel where they opened the doors for them and made sure they were safely inside before wishing them a good evening and going on their way. Homeless angels on the dark night streets of Sacramento? Talk about a mixed catch!



Jesus knows we may see ourselves as the wheat in the fields readying our harvest of well lived lives,—but God, Jesus says, clearly would prefer us to be invasive weeds like the mustard bushing out, growing tall, with deep roots, filling up whole vineyards, expanding like yeast out there in the world, passionately seeking God' Kingdom with single-minded purpose, and embracing one and all for the love of Jesus — leaving the final results of all of this crazy mess to God to sort out in the end.

Maybe, just maybe what Jesus is saying is, "The Kingdom of God is an extravagance of grace"

But Jesus knows he has to figure out a way for us to experience that for ourselves in a way we can relate to but also in a way that will make us break out of the expected or assumed to be appropriate behavior and DO as God would do! Because that is what following Jesus is about: Doing as GOD would do—as Jesus DID.

Here's one more thought to end on: Jesus went to great lengths to find ways to illustrate for us over and over again what he and we've been taught since childhood but do not always know how to do:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."