

Stephen Shaver
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
July 26, 2020
Year A, Proper 12, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2
[1 Kings 3:5-12](#)
[Psalm 119:129-136](#)
[Romans 8:26-39](#)
[Matthew 13:31-33,44-52](#)

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A few years ago I was at a family wedding in South Carolina. And almost as soon as I stepped out of the airport I was struck by the climate, by the overall feeling of things: the heat. The humidity. The chirping crickets. And all around, the green, green, green. So different from the golds and greens of our California hills and evergreen forests: there it's deciduous trees, and vines growing on the deciduous trees, and more vines growing on those vines. Driving down the freeway is like being in a tunnel between two walls of solid vegetation. So much of that is thanks to just one plant: kudzu. It started as an ornamental ground cover crop imported from Asia. Well, it covered the ground, all right. It's been called "the vine that ate the South." It spread to become one of the most successful invasive species ever.

Now we don't have kudzu here in California. But we do have invasive plants of our own. Last week I was at Spring Lake. Everywhere by the footpaths are big bushes of thorny blackberry and tall stands of wild fennel. Now both blackberries and fennel are plants that people cultivate, and produce delicious things to eat; but they also easily grow wild and take over all kinds of places where they might not have been wanted.

It's hard to contain an invasive species.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field," says Jesus. And we nod our heads, having heard this parable before, perhaps: the tiny seed becomes a big tree, God can make great things out of little things, very inspiring, next parable please. In our place and time we can easily miss what Jesus' hearers would have noticed right away: the strangeness of this example.

For one thing, it's not the most impressive of examples. A mustard plant grows to be something like a big bush. You could charitably describe it as a tree, maybe. In this version of the parable Jesus hedges his bets by also calling it "the greatest of all shrubs"—a phrase that always makes me smile in its modesty. It's sort of like the slogan of my former hometown of Reno, Nevada: "the biggest little city in the world."

But Jesus had plenty of other symbolic possibilities to choose from. In fact, he seems to be intentionally reworking an image from the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel in which a nation like Assyria or Babylon or Israel itself is compared to a cedar of Lebanon: a towering, vertical giant in which the birds of the air find shelter. So Jesus is ignoring the image of the cedar, an image as available to him in his place and time as a giant redwood would be for ours, and instead comparing God's kingdom to something like a really big blackberry bush.

And just like that blackberry bush, mustard is prolific. It grows really fast, and some varieties are invasive. Here in wine country some vineyard owners use it as a cover crop and we see bright yellow fields toward the end of winter. It reduces erosion, contains chemicals that keep away harmful worms, and makes a great mulch when it's turned under later in the spring. So mustard is really useful when it grows where you want it. But in the wrong place or at the wrong time, mustard could start to grow all over everything, transgressing your neatly planned garden boundaries, crowding out all your other plants and growing into a big, bushy mess. The greatest of all shrubs, indeed.

You may be familiar with Godly Play, the Montessori-based way of telling sacred stories that we use in our children's Sunday School. In Godly Play, the materials for parable stories are always kept inside wooden boxes that are closed with lids. That's because a parable isn't always easy to get into. Sometimes, no matter which way we turn it, we can't find our way in, and we just have to come back another time. And even when we do find our way inside a parable, there is always more there waiting for us to come back and discover it.

Sometimes in Godly Play children will call a parable a "terrible." And there's wisdom in that too, because there is something transgressive about a good parable. It's like that with the next one too: the woman takes three pecks of flour—a huge amount of flour, about fifty pounds—and mixes in yeast, which throughout scripture is almost always used as a symbol of impurity. What does it mean, this yeast of impurity, working its way invisibly through the flour until all of it is leavened? And what about the sneakiness of the person who finds treasure in a field and, instead of telling the owner, rehides it for just long enough to go and buy the field at market price?

Today's gospel reading has things to teach us about how God makes big things out of little ones, yes. But there's another dimension to these parables: they are about slowness and imperceptibility, but also about contamination. Jesus in these terribles is telling us that the kingdom of heaven is not at all what we might have expected. It's not like a cedar of Lebanon, not a superpower like Assyria or Rome or the superpowers of our own day. Nor is it a well-behaved garden plant that grows in its proper compartment. It is like an invasive weed that grows unpredictably, messing up our carefully planned boundaries and rules; sometimes seeming to do nothing for a long time, then bursting out with new shoots in a new direction; sometimes growing close to the ground and hidden, sometimes stretching towards the sky for all to see.

It grows from the smallest of seeds: a single man on a cross, rejected, ignored, and impure. And from that seed it has been growing for thousands of years, and it is still growing today. Our call is to become branches of this invasive species, to take part in this contamination of love that is spreading through God's world. You might say the kingdom of heaven is going viral. You might not always know it is there. But it is growing wherever people are proclaiming good news and doing the work of justice, healing, and love.