



SEEDS

March 2015

GOOD NEWS *Associates*

13730 15th Ave NE , A302, Seattle, WA 98125

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Revisiting The Mustard Seed

By Lorraine Watson

What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches. Luke 13:18-19 NRSV

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is a familiar story. It is often said that it is a story of how the tiniest of all seeds becomes a large tree with the takeaway that there is great power in the tiny seed to produce something mighty. Applied to the Kingdom of God, it starts small, but has great power within it to become mighty.

But to limit it to that explanation misses some of the nuances of the parable which would have been evident to those hearing Jesus tell it. Actually the parable doesn't make sense and is a laughable, nonsensical description of the Kingdom of God when taken at face value.



A large mustard plant in the Middle East.

You see, there were rules about where things could be planted in a Jewish garden and mustard seeds definitely could not be planted in a formal garden. Once mustard got started, it was hard to get rid of because the seeds germinated so easily. The plant would grow and spread very quickly until it was out of control, taking over the whole garden. Rules said that very small quantities of mustard could be planted in a large field where there was sufficient room, but garden plots by nature were too small for what amounts to a weed.

Jewish Rabbis often had discussions about "diverse kinds" and mustard seeds were common to those discussions. Rules about diverse kinds were important as they brought order to a disorderly world, separating secular and sacred. Order represented holiness and established purity boundaries. Separation in garden plots maintained order and kept things in their proper place. When mustard was planted in the garden, it would take over and cross the boundaries, creating a mixed and unclean garden. This was just another reason not to plant mustard seeds in a garden.

As a Rabbi, Jesus would have been familiar with these common rabbinic discussions and would have known the rules about mustard seeds. So, why does he say that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed planted in a garden, something everyone knows you would *never* do?

Jesus also says that the mustard seed grew into a tree. Again, that's not what happens. Given time, mustard plants grow into large shrubs of unwieldy proportions, but not trees. So, why would Jesus say it became a tree? If Jesus wanted a good example of a large tree grown from a small seed, why not use the mighty and well-known Cedar of Lebanon?

Planting mustard in a Jewish garden was shocking. But wasn't Jesus scandalous throughout his ministry? Remember his conversation with the woman at the well, touching the leper, letting the woman with a bad reputation wash his feet, his response to the woman caught in adultery, eating with tax collectors, etc. And his stories were no different—the good Samaritan, the wheat and the tares, the great banquet. There is a theme of radical inclusion throughout the gospels that says everyone is welcome. It is the obvious theme in this parable, but we've missed it. We've been more pharisaical than Christian, keeping to a sense of separation and purity. The Kingdom of God is open to absolutely everyone. It is messy and unwieldy, but it is alive and thriving. Just as babies have dirty diapers, the church was never meant to be proper and tidy!

This large and chaotic bush of a mustard plant Jesus calls a tree. It is a more fitting image of the Kingdom of God. It sets up the conflict between what is and what is anticipated. The Kingdom of God did start out small. But like the mustard tree, it doesn't look anything like what was expected. It is both entirely different in nature and greater in scope than would be natural. The Kingdom of God is an upside down kingdom here on earth now, across time, around the world, and beyond time.

The birds of the air settle in the branches of the mustard tree. The birds of the air represent the Gentiles coming and finding shelter. It is a hint of the Gentiles which are welcomed into the early church in the book of Acts.

All are welcome as we look for ways to be faithful to Jesus' call to live the Kingdom. Yes, our garden won't necessarily have neat rows of like things looking pretty. But we care more about following Jesus than about looking good and remaining pure.

Quakers have long said that there is no separation between sacred and secular. By rabbinic standards, we're definitely mixing kinds. But Peter heard God's message, "Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean." Acts 10:15 (GNB) Do not those words apply to us as well?

The Kingdom of God is amazing—it starts small and grows out of control. It is tenacious and never gives up. Even when eradicated, Christianity has persisted. It is inclusive and messy. It grows beyond expectation to a thing of God's creation. Let us enter the Kingdom and let it be as radical and scandalous as it intends to be.

Discussion based on the following sources: (1) *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* by Bernard Brandon Scott, Fortress Press, chapter 19 *The Mustard Tree*, pages 373-387. (2) *The Radical Stories of Jesus: Interpreting the Parables Today* by Michael Ball, Regent's Park College, pages 113-117.



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