

“The Marvelous Mustard Seed”
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Does Jesus think we are fools?

The mustard seed, first of all, may indeed be small; but it is *not* the **smallest** of seeds, as Jesus proclaimed. I am not even a gardener and I can name a number of seeds smaller than the mustard seed: begonia, petunia, orchid, even the poppy seed you may have had on a bagel this morning is smaller than a mustard seed.

Not only that. According to Jesus, the mustard seed then grows into the greatest of shrubs, and then a tree, so that the birds of the air make nests in its branches. But in most cases, mustard grows into a *plant*, and maybe into a shrub... but into a tree? That’s a bit of a reach for the humble mustard seed.

Now, none of us are farmers, so I can forgive a congregation in 2023 for not knowing too much about the mustard seed or the mustard plant. When we hear the word *mustard*, we think of the hot dog you can order at Hiram’s, or the pretzel with mustard you ate at CitiField, or for the fancy chefs among us, the mustard vinaigrette you made to dress your salad. When I moved to Chicago, locals informed me that I could be ridiculed for ordering a hot dog with ketchup, but in the Windy City, mustard is a respectable condiment. And in fact, in Chicago I finally gained a taste for the earthy and sour, peppery, pungent, potent flavor of mustard.

As for the agricultural society of first-century Palestine, well, I’d assume people knew just what to expect out of these seeds and these plants. They knew this humble seed also makes a humble plant. This is no cedar of Lebanon here. Maybe Jesus’ first-century audience weren’t fools; they were in on Jesus’ irony. Jesus’ followers were people who were small and scrappy, like not only the mustard seed, but the mustard plant, too. And yet, it is upon them to bring about nothing less than the kingdom of God.

The truth is, what our faith presents us with is greatness: nothing less than the wolf lying down with the lamb... Justice that falls down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream... healing the sick, feeding the hungry, even loving our neighbor as ourselves: it’s no simple act. But what we bring to it, in our flawed faith and our frail bodies, seems pretty humble.

And yet Jesus tells us that all we need is a mustard seed, and we can achieve greatness: within our heart, with our faith, within society.

It’s kind of like Jacob, thinking it’s Rachel he married— only to wake up to discover Leah beside him in bed. Turns out Jacob— who had already tricked his brother out of his birthright and deceived their father into giving him his brother’s blessing— wasn’t the only one in that family

famous for his trickery. Laban, who was Rachel and Leah's father, decided to marry off his older daughter first. He swapped the sisters out in the concealed marriage ceremony. Then Laban kept Jacob for another 7 years of servitude before Jacob could earn the right to marry Rachel, who had first won his heart. Told from this patriarchal perspective, it seems like these young women are property, chattel even, to be earned by men. Unlike Jacob's mother, Rebekah, who gives her consent to being married to Isaac, we never hear what Rachel and Leah think about their arrangements. Not only that, the scriptures pit the sisters against one another, describing Rachel as "graceful and beautiful" and though the NRSV is generous in its translation of Leah as having "lovely" eyes, the original Hebrew can be translated as "delicate" or "weak" eyes. Later, the scripture tells, when God sees that Leah is hated, God opens her womb first. Each of her first three sons are named some version of "Now God hears how I have suffered, and my husband will finally love me." In the meantime, Rachel goes years sharing the struggles of infertility that were known to Sarah, and Rebekah. The ability to produce male heirs changed the value of these women's lives. I wonder how the women would have told this story, if the scripture writers had actually given them voices. The Jewish midrashim make commentaries on this story. One version says that Rachel and Leah were in on the deception all along, that Rachel was too young to marry and didn't want to, and so she lay beneath the marital bed using her voice to trick Jacob into thinking that Leah was her.

I wonder: if Jesus could have told this story, would it have been any different? You know, there is an invasive quality to the mustard plant. It can take over a whole garden, a whole field even, if you aren't careful with it. Some read the parable of the mustard seed as a message to the followers of Jesus, that small and insignificant as they are in the face of Rome's oppressive might, actually have the power to subvert the whole Roman Empire. What Jesus taught was going to take over the whole culture and change it into something else: notions of power in relationship, notions of gender, notions of who gets to be an insider and who is on the margins, notions of who will be last, and who will be first.

We spent a few days last week in Montreal on a vacation with our friends Erik and Kerry. Erik is a Lutheran pastor, and in addition to sharing our long and dear friendship, I always value the chance to talk shop with Erik— while our non-clergy spouses roll their eyes and disappear together to discuss or explore something else. Erik and I went to seminary together and were both in the ordination process at a time when we were on the early side of change, before either denomination had opened to be inclusive of LGBTQ leadership. Neither of us had great options to move forward in the vocation to which we felt called— I stepped out of the Presbyterian church and joined a more inclusive congregation, but Erik felt called to change his church, and he put his vocation on the line to do that. His first call was to a church in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago. That dying church took a chance on him, a gay man, as a last-ditch effort; the bishop had wanted to close them, but instead they hired Erik as their part-time, underpaid pastor— and their choice brought about their resurrection. He led them from 8 members to 175 members within the span of 10 years. That's the power of the humble mustard seed.

While in Montreal, Erik and I had a number of conversations about how the church is changing. Now he is the Pastor of the Lutheran seminary in Chicago. Erik says that in the ELCA– his Lutheran denomination– the total enrollment in the 7 Lutheran seminaries in the US today is less than the total enrollment in the largest Lutheran seminary in the US 10 years ago. Erik asked the question– will the church be able to sustain my sense of call and vocation for the next 15-20 years I hope to give to ministry? I suppose I should be asking that question, too.

Erik and I both felt the call to ministry in our earlier years, when the mainline church still had grand notions of itself. Still today, many churches' goals are to return to a version of what the church looked like in the 1980's, without being realistic about the fact that they may not even be around to baptize the next generation of children. It's like Jacob, thinking he went to bed with Rachel as his wife, and waking up to the sun falling on Leah's face. *What now?*

I imagine there are some of you as well, who thought you were signing up to join in on one thing, but wake up to find it is something else entirely. A career that did not go as you planned... a relationship that disappointed... a part of your body that once worked, but is not working the same way as you had always counted on...disability income you had counted on that a judge arbitrarily denies. How about a country that no longer guarantees the right to reproductive health? *What now?*

I recently listened to a podcast called *The Daily*; the episode was called "How Affirmative Action Changed Their Lives." One of the voices was a young woman from Tenafly, finishing her senior year of high school. Her whole life, Gia Shin had been groomed for success: her parents– both immigrants from South Korea– sacrificed everything so that their daughter could have the golden ticket to social mobility. They worked hard, long, grueling hours so that she could get the kind of education they saw as access: access to follow your passion, access to make a good living without having to do the grueling work. As a high school student, this young woman had an impressive 4.5 GPA; she was the concertmaster of her orchestra; she had excellent test scores, impressive extracurriculars and community activities. Her whole life, her peers and her parents assured her she was heading to an Ivy League college. But after being rejected from her first choice, early-decision college, and then every other school after that, she scrambled to put another application together, to a school that had never been part of her dreams. Not only was she letting down her own dreams; she was also letting down her parents and the community that had invested so much hope into her future. *What now?*

Some went to immediately explain this loss away. "It's the fault of affirmative action. Her seat got taken by someone who is brown or black, but didn't have as good qualifications as she did." They even said, "if you had just applied a year later– after the Supreme Court overturned affirmative action– you'd have been admitted." The student grew, however, to see that the truth is probably more nuanced than that. She rejects the tendency to pit Asian Americans against black and brown Americans. The perception that these seats have been stolen by hordes of brown and black people just doesn't bear out, judging by how few are actually enrolled in Ivy League institutions. She figures that maybe it is more likely that a seat she might have earned was taken by a legacy kid or scholarship athlete, than someone who had been favored for their

race. In time, she was able to embrace the school that had at last chosen her, and she knows that her school name doesn't indicate her self-worth. As for her mother, Gia says, she has shifted the focus of her attention on hopes for the person that Gia will become in college, rather than what is her mom's dream that Gia will achieve.

But the nature of a seed is that it must die to one thing— its tiny form contained within a membrane— in order to become something else entirely. The miracle of our faith is that our story does not end with death. *We* become something else, entirely.

That's how powerful the mustard seed is. Mustard was used then as it is now to flavor food and as a vegetable in and of itself; mustard greens act much like kale or collards. But it can be something else, too. Mustard can be medicine. Today, WebMd suggests that mustard *may* be antimicrobial; *may* have possible antioxidant effects; and *may* have anti-cancer activity. I guess the pharmaceuticals haven't put research to prove or disprove a medicine so simple. But 2000 years ago, Pliny the Elder, who was a Roman author and naturalist philosopher who lived at the same time of Jesus, was more emphatic about the wonders of mustard; he said mustard "was extremely beneficial to health" and could treat "snake and scorpion bites, toothache, indigestion, asthma, epilepsy, constipation, dropsy, lethargy, tetanus, leprous sores, and other types of illness."¹

This is actually making that small and humble mustard seed... seem pretty marvelous!

I am not sure yet what God has in store for us and the plantings of our faith. But something I do know is this: the seeds of our faith are worth nothing as just seeds. It requires dispersing, interacting, mixing: doing risky things that will change us and change everything we touch, in order for our faith to be effective. I know that we need not fear the possibility of our death, even though I still do fear it. I am going to stake my trust in Jesus Christ and his promise in what he can do with small, insignificant things.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* notes this on p. 177 with footnotes of original sourcing by Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*.