

HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“The mile-a-minute vine.”

“The foot-a –night vine.”

“The vine that ate the South.”

We know it as kudzu.

Kudzu was introduced to the United States at the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. Japanese exhibitors planted show gardens that were a hit with American gardeners. In the 1920’s, a couple of nursery operators in Chipley, Florida promoted the use of kudzu as forage and even had a mail-order business. During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps planted acres and acres of kudzu throughout the south for erosion control. In the 1940’s, farmers were paid as much as \$8 per acre to plant fields of kudzu, which grew very well in the South because of the climate and the lack of natural predators.

Unfortunately, kudzu grew a little ***too well*** in the South. By 1953, the U.S. government had stopped advocating the use of kudzu. In 1972, the USDA declared kudzu to be a weed. Scientists and others have spent years trying to develop ways to eradicate, control, or, since kudzu seems to be here to stay, use the vines creatively. According to one website, “Visitors to the South are sometimes awestruck by scenic vistas which reveal miles and miles of seemingly endless vines . . . Southerners just close their windows at night to keep the kudzu out.”¹

Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farms in Georgia, is also known for his Cotton Patch version of the New Testament, especially some of the Gospels and Paul’s letters. In this distinctly southern version of the story of Jesus, Jordan uses Southern dialect, images, and settings to get the gospel across in a more contemporary way. With apologies to Clarence Jordan, I suggest that if he were to write his Cotton Patch version of these parables from Mark 4, they might sound something like this:

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter kudzu vines on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the kudzu would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the tendril, then the green leaves, until the vines cover everything in sight. With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a kudzu vine, which, when sown upon the ground is lovely to look at, but it grows up a mile-a-minute, until it covers everything in sight. Whoever has ears to hear, let them close their windows at night.

I was born in the deep South and have lived all across the South my entire life, but I have to confess that my menu of likes doesn’t include mustard greens. However,

people who know about these kinds of things (and actually like to eat mustard greens!) tell me the mustard plants they know about could never grow up to be as big as a tree. Obviously, the mustard shrub in the parable is something different. In fact, there is a variety of mustard plant in the Middle East that grows very large, even up to 8-to-10 feet. Technically, it's not a tree, but from the descriptions of the plant, it's easy to see why someone might call it a tree.

Descriptions of that kind of mustard shrub point out that it was considered to be a weed, definitely not something you would plant in a garden (as the gospel of Luke says) or in a field (as Matthew says). Apparently this kind of mustard shrub is wild, tenacious, fast-growing, and troublesome. I don't know if people in Jesus' day had to close their windows at night to keep the mustard shrub out, but a little mustard seed growing into an 8-to-10 foot "tree" tells us something about these parables about seeds and the kingdom of God.

There are many explanations and interpretations of the parable of the mustard seed. Some people have said the parable means big things can come from small things. Some people have said the parable is a symbol of the church that provides shelter to all who come to the safety of its "branches." Some people have said the parable describes the inevitable growth of the church on earth.

That big things can come from small beginnings is a common understanding of this parable. Certainly there is an element of that meaning in this little story. However, when you pair the mustard seed parable with the parable about somebody scattering seed on the ground, you get more of a sense of *surprise and mystery*. For example, Jesus says, ". . . the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself (almost literally, "automatically"!)." You put this little seed in the ground and, almost as if by magic, this stalk of grain or this 8-to-10 foot shrub/tree comes up, looking nothing at all like what you put in the ground.

On top of that, until that grain pushes up through the ground or the mustard shrub takes off, it's almost as if nothing is really happening. Of course, something **is** happening, even when we can't see it. As we sleep and rise night and day and go about our usual business, something is happening. Then, "all of a sudden," we see the results and they can be almost mysterious and certainly wonderful.

When Nancy and I served at the First Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, NC in the early 1980's, Vernon Sechrist was a member of the congregation. He was the managing editor of the Rocky Mount *Telegram* and something of a local legend. He wrote a weekly column for the paper called "Relax." I used to enjoy visiting with him and hearing him tell his very entertaining stories. He and another man in town had a long-running rivalry as UNC and Duke fans. Their rivalry involved playing practical jokes on each other related to their school loyalties. Vernon told me about the time he went to his friend's house late one night and sowed grass seed of a distinctly different kind and color than the grass already in his friend's yard. When the seed germinated and began to grow, his friend saw a big UNC spelled out right there in his front yard -- "the seed sprouts and grows, he does not know how"!

Here's another illustration that makes the point of the seed sowing and the mustard tree growing. Our niece, Georgia, is a composer and performer who works on Broadway. She has spent many years honing her craft, establishing herself in the business, working in all sorts of musical jobs. She has done what almost every aspiring performer and composer has done and has to do to make it in show business – she has “paid her dues” through the years. Georgia once talked to me about Tony award winners who are referred to as “overnight sensations.” “Remember,” Georgia said, “these ‘overnight sensations’ have probably been working for twenty years to get where they are. It’s just that now everybody is hearing about them.”

That seems to be the point of Jesus’ parable about the seeds and the kingdom of God. Even when we think God really isn’t doing much of anything, God is at work behind the scenes. If nothing else, these parables should humbly remind us that the growth of God’s kingdom in this world is beyond our control and understanding. We are invited and called to recognize God’s kingdom and play a part in it, but, much like the seeds that germinate in the ground day and night or the tiny mustard seed that sprouts into a shrub large enough for the birds of the air, there is something mysterious about God’s ways and God’s progress and God’s purpose.

A few minutes ago, John read from Ezekiel 17 about God taking a sprig from the lofty cedar and setting it out on a high and lofty mountain. Ezekiel’s description of God’s tree-planting sounds a lot like Jesus’ parable: “On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.”

The mighty and noble cedar tree, famous for its beauty, durability, strength, and height would be a wonderful symbol of the kingdom of God. Can’t you hear Jesus saying, “The kingdom of God is like a sprig that grew into a mighty cedar of Lebanon, high upon the mountain of Israel”? Instead, Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is like a mustard shrub . . .” Tall, to be sure, but hardly like a majestic cedar tree. On the other hand, the mustard shrub is tenacious and hardy and amazing in its growth.

To be even more blunt, the mustard shrub is invasive and hard to get rid of. Isn’t that an interesting image to use for God’s ways in your life and mine, in this church and in the world? The little seeds sown on the ground and the little mustard seed planted in the field tell us to be confident that God is at work, to be patient and to wait for great things that suddenly seem to appear, almost “automatically.” The little seeds also tell us to open our eyes and look for signs of growth and God’s kingdom at work in unexpected places, and to be prepared to take part in that kingdom.

In her sermon called “The Seeds of Heaven,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, “There is always that possibility, you know – that God decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places that treasure hunters would be sure to check but in the last place that any of us would think to look, namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives: like a silver spoon in the drawer with the stainless, like a diamond necklace on the bureau with the rhinestones; the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, the kingdom of heaven all mixed in with the

humdrum and ho-hum of our days, as easy to find as an amaryllis bulb in the dark basement that suddenly sends forth a shoot, or a child's smile when she awakes from sleep, or the first thunderstorm after a long drought – all of them signs of the kingdom of heaven, clues to all the holiness hidden in the dullest of our days.”²

Today's prayer after the sermon comes from my friend, Chris Denny, pastor of the Elizabethtown Presbyterian Church, who writes his blog called “Almost Daily Prayer – Passion for God.”

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, the kingdom of God grows, and we, like the farmer, do not know how. Like a seed planted, your kingdom grows underground where we cannot see it transforming, shaping, becoming. Then without warning the seedling bursts out of the ground lifting its head to the sun. Your kingdom is similar, growing deep within transforming, shaping, becoming. Then when we least expect it, your faith in us bursts forth reaching out to others pointing them to the Son. May we be the harvest of faith: fruitful, abundant, nutritious. May it be so in our lives today.

Lord Jesus, take our small faith, plant it in fertile soil, help it grow strong so that when others need a safe place, a resting place, a place to make a home, a place to raise their young, may they find strength in the branches of our faith, that they may rest, find refuge, lean on us, learn from us, teach the faith to their children. Take the church's small faith, nourish it, fertilize it, grow it, so that our branches will be strong, providing shade from the heat of life, rest along the journey, place to make a nest - a home, room to raise young, berries to nourish those who come to us, hope to sustain the faithful. Lord, take our small faith, make us a mighty shrub for the sake of others. Amen.

NOTES

¹“The Amazing Story of Kudzu: Love It, Or Hate It. . . It Grows on You,” at www.maxshores.com/kudzu/

²Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Seeds of Heaven,” from her book of sermons by the same name, found in a sermon “The Parable of the Mustard Seed,” by Rev. Cathy Northrup, June 15, 2008, First Presbyterian Church, Wichita, Kansas.