

parable forces us to look at ways in which we may *hinder* the Kingdom of Heaven, both deliberately and without thinking.

The theologian Dominic Crossan is a wonderful commentator on the parable of Jesus, and his writings have given me the following idea. Imagine that you do not know the Parable of the Mustard Seed, that you never heard or read it in Matthew, Mark or Luke. Then, imagine that you are on a game show, or taking a test and you have to think of the best possible answer to complete the following sentence with the name of some sort of tree: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like _____.' What would you say? Would you name the sturdy oak? Would you list the tall and stately sycamore? Would you answer with the pine or spruce, ever green with life and enduring the worst of storms by bending in the wind and under the weight of snow? Or would you point to the tall and leafy beech tree, home and shelter to partridge and other birds and small animals? Or, imagine that you are among Jesus' hearers, hearing this parable, probably for the first time. For Hebrew hearers, the mighty cedar of Lebanon, of which the Temple itself was built, might have seemed the most appropriate metaphor for God's mighty rule on earth. Yet,

Jesus names none of these trees. In fact, His metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven is not a tree at all, but rather a useful but also troublesome bush.

The *mustard bush* did have its uses, then as now, as both a medicine and as a condiment. But it had, and has, a notorious reputation for taking over areas where it was not planted and crowding out other vegetation. Though more useful than mile-a-minute or kudzu, mustard spreads both through its root system and, thanks to the birds that feed on the tiny mustard seed, through aerial bombardment to the exasperation of those who try to control or eliminate it. Dr. Crossan reminds us that we should always imagine Jesus telling these stories not so much to land owners as to farm workers, people who would have found the image Jesus uses in this parable hilarious. They knew how fast and how unstoppable was the growth of mustard, all through the tiniest of seeds, even when it displeased the biggest landowner, and, if the Rabbi from Nazareth was sure that God's coming kingdom of mercy and forgiveness and justice was like that, then those farmhands might have shouted in good colloquial Aramaic, '*Alleluia!*'

But others hearing Jesus, or hearing *of* what He had said about the mustard seed and the Kingdom of Heaven might not have been so delighted. A Slovak friend of mine, knowing that I am mostly of English heritage, asked me once “Do you know how to make an Englishman happy when he is old?” The inevitable answer was, “Tell him a joke when he is a young man.” There would have been many such ‘Englishmen’ among Jesus’ hearers, asking one another a few days or weeks after the fact, “What exactly did He mean by saying, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed’? We try to control the mustard bush. It grows like a weed! Did he mean that we are trying to control, to limit, to *obstruct* the coming Kingdom of God?! HmMMM!”

Indeed. Our Lord teaches us in the prayer He gave us to ask our Heavenly Father, “Your Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.” In the *Small Catechism* we learn that this Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer means, “God’s Kingdom is surely coming, with or without our asking, but in this prayer Our Lord teaches us to pray that it will also come with us and through us.” But sometimes it does come *without* us, or *around* us or, if need be, right *over* our stubborn

and unforgiving wills. This happens at two levels, it seems to me, at the personal or individual level and at the corporate level of the Church and society.


Individually, we obstruct and attempt to hinder the Kingdom of Heaven when we refuse to believe that it is coming, that forgiveness is real and that reconciliation and genuine peace is possible. “I hear what you’re saying, Pastor, but I don’t believe anybody forgives anybody, not really!” How many times have I heard that?! We try to uproot the Kingdom of Heaven when we refuse to forgive or to accept the forgiveness of others, when we refuse to admit that we are at least partly in the wrong or that others might be at least partly in the right. We try to exterminate the Kingdom of Heaven by pouring out the poisonous bile of our hatred, prejudice and fear of others who are different from ourselves or of those in whom we see our own flaws reflected, never mind that each child of Eve is born in the image of God, never mind that God has revealed His determination to love them, and to love us, at any cost.


At the corporate or collective level of Church and society, we may give lip service to God and family values while, deliberately or

thoughtlessly excluding others from the family of God and the human family that is the community, society and nation in which we live. That so many of the German family names in this community were anglicized or hibernicized over the course of history is a reminder that it was once not acceptable to be of 'foreign extraction' in this country which subjected most of its truly native inhabitants to mass murder. And today, as we stand by and watch the racist dream of an all-white society increasingly realized in our part of York County, as the descendants of people of color who helped settle this land feel less and less safe among the rest of us, we are reminded of that same intolerance based on fear and ignorance, a vision of the world at direct variance with God's Kingdom of love.

In the congregation of Jesus Christ, the Church, we are self-consciously determined to practice an inclusive love of all who seek God and the people of God in this place. A yet, how determined is our hospitality to others? It is no small matter, in an age of global warming and increased incidence of pulmonary disease, to provide as much of a shelter from the oppressive heat and humidity of summer as from the cold of winter when we gather to worship God,

to study the Word of God and to do the common work of the Church in this place. This congregation has done much to make itself accessible to those with physical handicaps and even more to overcome the unseen barriers to newcomers. To not provide year-round climate control for worship and study and the common work of this congregation when Lutheran congregations that do are within easy driving distance on the grounds that it was not available before is to shut our ears to God's call to be an inclusive Christian community for today and tomorrow.

May the Holy Spirit grant us the good-humored faith of those farmhands who first heard Jesus tell this story of the pesky little mustard seed and the stubborn growth it produces. May we look on the sheer power of God's love and mercy to overcome all that stands in its way and cheerfully resign ourselves to live within that love and to work with it, not against it. And may that seed of faith in God's rule among us take such root here that *all* God's children will find rest and shelter in its many branches!  Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever.  Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!**

*'O Jesus, help!' abbrev. 'J.J.!'

**'To God alone be the glory!' abbrev. 'S.D.G.!'