

**Sermon**  
**Rev. Shawn Fiedler**

Good things come in small packages.  
Large streams from little fountains flow.  
Tall oaks from little acorns grow.  
There are no small parts, just small actors.

You know those phrases, they are written on coffee cups and needlepoint pillows;  
reminding us that small things can lead to greatness.  
The bible is filled with examples of how God uses small things to accomplish something grand,  
big.  
What starts as a simple garden flourishes into a mighty creation.  
A scrawny shepherd is anointed king.  
A baby brings salvation.

And today two parables--the mustard seed and the yeast--appear to teach the same lesson.  
The kingdom of God starts very small, but like how a tiny seed bursts into a mighty tree--or like  
how a little yeast causes the loaf to rise, the kingdom of God is going to grow--God will  
transform smallness to greatness, make extraordinary from the ordinary.

And all of that is pretty great and true. But by now, after three weeks of parables you and I know  
Jesus rarely speaks that plainly.

To that first century crowd, the idea that the kingdom of God would be like a mustard seed or  
like yeast would rarely be a welcomed metaphor.

Pliny the Elder, a first century Roman historian--with the best name--wrote that mustard, "with its  
pungent taste and fiery effect...is extremely beneficial for the health. [But] it grows entirely  
wild...when it has once been sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed  
when it falls germinates at once."<sup>1</sup>

What Pliny is telling us is that the mustard plant--which grows to be a bush, not a lofty tree- is  
invasive, quick to sprout, and can have dangerous qualities. Those first century farmers knew  
that if that plant found its way into your perfectly planted garden, the plant would destroy  
everything around it. And if you were to plant it for the health benefits--as Pliny suggests--it  
would require careful monitoring. In fact, Jewish law provided strict instructions that if you were  
to plant mustard, it was to be far from any other plants so that the mustard would not corrupt the  
others.

Simply put: whether it is carefully cultivated or let to roam wildly, the mustard plant will soon  
become like a creeping ivy taking over anything in its path.

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<sup>1</sup> Pliny, "Natural History" 19.170-171; Rackham et al. 5.528-529

And as it turns out, yeast contains that same sort of unexpected twist. While in the early days of the pandemic, we all clamored to buy yeast from the market, first century bakers would know yeast as a symbol of corruption. In their day, in their hot dry desert day, bread kept longer when it was unleavened, flat without yeast. To add rising power, yeast, to flour would render it corrupted, useless. The bread would quickly age and rot. One scholar noted that to say something is like yeast in the first century, is akin to saying that it is like rust.

So the Kingdom of God, Jesus said, is like an unruly plant and like rust. The kingdom, the reign of God? It's invasive, Jesus said, it is insistent, corrupting, perhaps a bit annoying.

Now it may sound a bit unsettling and uncomfortable to imagine God's peaceable, loving kingdom as an invasive weed or a spoiling agent, but to those first century listeners--this is Good News.

Living under the crushing thumb of the Roman empire, Jesus is telling them that God's kingdom is going to destroy the ways of Caesar's Kingdom. Jesus is telling them that God's kingdom is going to be like a mustard bush, unstoppable and relentless as it disturbs the status quo of Rome's carefully planted garden. God's kingdom is going to be like yeast that spoils flour used to bake Rome's oppressive power. God's kingdom is urgent, shocking, abundant. And for those first century disciples, this weed-like Kingdom, this leavened reign--this is Good News.

Now, to be clear what Jesus is not describing is the kingdom as a finished project, he's not describing some far off place where everything is just and perfect, Jesus is not describing the what, but the how. How the kingdom, the reign of God unfolds, how it accomplishes God's mighty deeds.

And I have to say, I'm onboard. I'm ready to join in God's sneaky, subversive, disruptive kingdom building. I'm ready to sow those mustard seeds and scatter that yeast, so that God's reign can begin to germinate and grow, rise and corrupt. Because let's be honest, you and I know there are a lot of gardens out there that need to be disrupted.

They are neatly planted and well maintained. Their roots are deep, they have been protected at the highest costs and the soil in which they grow is rich in the ways of power.

But God is sowing the seeds of justice and change. And they are beginning to sprout and spread, flourishing and threatening those ways of the world that stand in opposition to God's reign.

That unruly mustard plant, that corruptible yeast--it's what Saint John Lewis would call "Good Trouble, necessary trouble." John Lewis, who died last week at the age of 80, dedicated his life to this disruptive, holy work. And don't be fooled by water-downed tellings of his life, John Lewis was an agitator and like the plants that God's reign, impatient. He sat in and stood up, spoke out and refused to be silenced. His advice to young people--really his advice to all of us--was to

“Get into good trouble, get in the way, stay in the way, to disrupt and demand.”<sup>2</sup> To be God’s seeds, bursting, spreading the ways of God.

You, Church, you are those seeds, germinating, starting to crack open, unleashing that reign of God now. I’ve seen it.

Those bursting seeds look a lot like our rallying for police reform. It looks like those calls, tweets, and emails that flooded the state house over the past few weeks demanding comprehensive police reform and just begins to do the work of honoring black lives. The kingdom of God.

Bursting seeds that look a lot like our All-Church Read. A whole community cracking open *How to Be an Anti-Racist* and corrupting those deeply rooted notions about race that many of us have long held. The kingdom of God.

Bursting seeds that look like white Christians from this church gathering in small groups to reflect on their own racism and to hold each other accountable. The kingdom of God.

Mustard. Yeast. Good trouble, necessary trouble. It’s about disrupting the orderly, stirring up resistance, uprooting long held beliefs, corrupting the soil in which the status quo grows. All in pursuit of God’s reign of justice and dignity.

So yes, God makes the extraordinary from the ordinary, something grand from something small, but also like an unrelenting weed or spoiling yeast, God is using us to bring about God’s invasive, disrupting, insistent reign.

And that is Good News. Amen.

*“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”*

Go forth today, people of God, as mustard seed and yeast--growing, rising, disrupting and spreading that Good News through Word and Deed of the one who comes to free the world, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *How to Remember John Lewis*, Eugene Peterson, The Washington Post. July 19, 2020.