

Sowing Kingdom Seeds Down Under

In a poem written in honour of Oscar Romero called "A Future Not Our Own" are these lines that we find meaningful for our ministry in Australia and New Zealand:

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

Jesus tries to explain what the kingdom of God is all about by sharing parables in Matthew 13. The Greek word for "parable" is *parabole* - literally, "thrown alongside." Parables are stories thrown alongside life, that prompt comparisons and contrasts between the two. Jesus' parables are like hand grenades when thrown alongside?they blow up old ideas.

One commentator says, "Jesus' parables remind us that the faith we preach and the kingdom we announce finally isn't an intellectual idea but an experience, an experience of the creative and redemptive power of God that continues to change lives. And sometimes the only way to get beyond our head and into our hearts is to, as Emily Dickenson advised, 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant.' And so parables come at us sideways, catching us by surprise to take our breath away at the beauty and depth of God's promises."¹

Two of the parables in Matthew 13 are found in verses 31-33:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...", *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast..."*

Jesus told two parables, one about a man and one about a woman. The stories involve mustard seed and yeast. Wild mustard was a weed, dreaded by farmers the way today's gardeners dread kudzu, crabgrass, or bindweed. It starts out small, but before long can take over a field. Yeast was often referred to in scripture in a negative connotation, representing the influence of sin in our lives.

The typical understanding of the parable of the mustard seed goes like this one I found online:

"The message and meaning of the parable is this: There is an incredible growth of God's reign in the world. We can talk about the incredible growth of God's reign in a person's life, in our own lives. The focus of the parable is growth, explosive growth, enormous growth."²

Gary Harder in his book, *Dancing Through Thistles In Bare Feet*, presents an alternative understanding.³ He says, "Something doesn't compute." There are tinier seeds than the

mustard seed. And the grown mustard plant is a shrub a couple of feet high at most. Why didn't Jesus use the image of the cedar like in Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:1-18 if he wanted to talk about incredible growth?

Harder says the mustard plant is famous for two qualities. First, it is an uncontrollable, pesky plant. It grows wild, is almost impossible to cultivate, and if you did get it to grow, you couldn't get rid of it.

It takes over. "The plant is unruly, subversive. It mingles. It messes up. It is wild. It can't be tamed. It's like jazz music, refusing to fit the 'proper' categories. ...The kingdom, Jesus said, is like a mustard seed - pesky, wild, uncontrollable, exasperating, subversive."⁴

God's movement will not advance by being the largest thing around. It will advance through subverting other kingdoms, other world movements including the Roman Empire and any empire today.

Secondly, in biblical times the mustard plant was considered a medicinal plant. It was a cure-all for everything from sore throats to snake bites. Mustard was a symbol of healing, which was one of Jesus' primary ministries.

Harder says, "The Spirit will never, ever be limited by our way of gardening. The Spirit will bring together people we think should be kept apart and will mess up our interpretations and categories. The Spirit will do all that to bring healing to our world and to the church."⁵

While teaching about this parable in Western Australia, one man said to us, "Handling mustard is not pleasant. It is a real irritant." Maybe the parable is saying that the work of the kingdom at times is "an irritant" in the world around us? a disruptive presence.

The second parable refers to yeast. Yeast has a permeating quality. It speaks of fermentation. It is something that works from within its host, stirring up change and transformation.

Amy-Jill Levine in her book *Short Stories By Jesus* says that what we should think about when reading "yeast" in the parable is "sourdough starter." "Perhaps the parable tells us that, like dough that has been carefully prepared with sourdough starter...the kingdom will come if we nurture it."⁶

In *Theology Of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, John Howard Yoder describes five different options for the status of mission workers.⁷ One he calls *integration* or *identification*. It is a yeast kind of ministry. He says, "There are places [in the world] where it is possible to go rather far in integrating oneself into the host culture." Taking on citizenship, educating children in the culture, and retiring there are possibilities for these mission workers. Yoder says, "They become permanent members of the local community. They would still bring the particular gifts associated with having come from somewhere else, but they would progressively seek to release their status as missionary and to become a permanent immigrant member of that community." He suggests a number of countries where this would be possible and the first he mentions is Australia.⁸

Anabaptist Witness

Anabaptist Witness is a global Anabaptist and Mennonite dialogue on key issues facing the church in mission.
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This is the type of mission worker we have become over the twenty-four years we have been associated with ministry in Australia and New Zealand. The gift we bring from elsewhere is the Anabaptist tradition and its rich heritage of radical discipleship. We've tried to be yeast for the kingdom in an Anabaptist way.

Nurturing this Anabaptist faith along in subversive ways has surprising results. It is often a ministry carried out behind the scenes?like hidden seeds and yeast. Here is one one recent example.

Australia, like much of the Western world, is struggling to deal with asylum seekers. It has chosen a policy of deterrence?treat asylum seekers cruelly and the message will get out that newcomers are not welcomed here. The government has declared there is no way asylum seekers will find a home here.

Many Christians, among others, are horrified by this response. A few got together and said we have to respond. While the government says "there is no way," they said "love makes a way" and a movement was born. "Love Makes A Way" is a movement of Christians seeking an end to Australia's inhumane asylum seeker policies through prayer and nonviolent love in action. Prayer vigils in the offices of Parliament members around the country have been held. Christian leaders from most denominations in the country have gladly been arrested.

When the first arrests happened and the news agencies began reporting the events, we looked at the photos and said "he is on our Anabaptist mailing list, and so is she, and..." Most of the planners of this movement are part of the Anabaptist movement here in Australia as are many of those getting arrested.

We were not directly involved in the organising of this movement but we planted the seeds. We nurtured the faith of the leaders - providing "*yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.*"

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1 David Lose, "Pentecost 7A: Parables that Do Things," *In the Meantime* (July 2014), accessed January 9, 2015, <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-7a-parables-that-do-things/>.

2 Edward Markquart, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed," *Sermons from Seattle*, accessed January 9, 2015, www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_seed_growing_automatically_GA.htm/.

3 Gary Harder, *Dancing Through Thistles in Bare Feet*, (Newton: Herald Press, 2007), 27-30.

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4 Ibid., 29.

5 Ibid., 30.

6 Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 124.

7 John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, eds. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013).

8 Ibid., 243.