
Sneaky Like Mustard

Mark 4:26-34

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 14, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Brian Blount

Everybody is posting these days. It's so easy. Time was, if you wanted to post a community note, you had to type it up or draw it up in big letters, preferably on a weather resistant piece of writing surface. Then you had to drive out to some public place and actually affix it to an honest to goodness real wooden or metal post so that passersby could see it and read it. All during that process, the thinking up what you wanted to say, the actual drafting what you thought into words, the printing up of those words, the posting of those words, the period of time you had before somebody actually came by and read those words, . . . all during that drawn out process you had the opportunity to rethink what you had said and, if necessary, if it turned out to be something you really should NOT be saying, to take it back and take it down before somebody saw it and responded to it in shock, dismay, or anger.

Today, with the immediate posting prowess promulgated by the likes of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, there is no grace publication period. What you think, if you dare write it down on one of these social media platforms, is instantly conveyed throughout the entire world, subjecting what you think to the widest cross-section of scrutiny and critique imaginable. I remain amazed at the number of people who think their private, and often lunatic musings about sensitive matters like race, religion, politics, and gender need to be shared with the public. When you think out loud, you often think outside the bounds of public acceptability. It is one thing to say it in your head; it is quite another to let it loose in the world of public discourse before you have had a chance to filter and refine it. The only thing sadder than the person who reactively posts what she has not thought through carefully is the person who actually sits down, reflects, thinks about what he wants to say, and then still tweets out something unimaginably stupid. The technological wizardry of our social media generation amplifies the importance of Mark Twain's classic counsel for his word of mouth age: "It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt."

As I read through the New Testament and reflect on this matter of thoughts that one should say out loud and thoughts that one should keep to oneself, I have wondered how Jesus

would have fared in a social media age. Perhaps God sent Jesus in the first century and not the twenty first century precisely so Jesus would not have access to social media technology. Can you imagine how Jesus would have fared if he had had license to Tweet! I cringe just thinking about it. While they are writing the obituary, picking out the casket, and preparing for the funeral, someone in the bereaved family reaches out to Jesus for counsel. Jesus tweets: "Let the dead bury their own dead." Did he just tweet that out loud? Jesus, I got into a bar fight last night and beat up this guy and I feel so bad. What should I do? Jesus tweets: "If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away..." Whoa, wait a minute, wait a minute, did you mean to say that the way you just said that? Jesus, their people just destroyed my people. What does God want us to do? Jesus tweets: "Love your enemies and pray for those who hurt you." Lord, you keep talking like that and I am so going to unfriend you! Jesus, you keep talking about the Reign of God, but you never give any details. We need specificity, man! Can you please clarify exactly what you mean by this Reign of God? The public is confused. What comes back? An Instagram picture of Jesus standing beside an 8 foot shrub. The caption reads: "The Reign of God is like a mustard seed. When sown on the ground it is the smallest of all the seeds. But when it grows up it becomes the greatest of shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that birds of the air can make nests in its shade." Okay . . . well, that clears everything up!

It turns out that Jesus actually did not intend that it clear everything up. At least not for everybody. Media intends to expound and explain. Jesus intends to confound and confuse. Notice, for example, how

Jesus uses the mustard seed parable, where he places it. It is the anchor parable in a chapter filled with parables. Before he explains the opening parable in the chapter, the parable of the sower, Jesus offers what one might consider very odd words for a teacher: "To you has been given the secret of the Reign of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables, in order that they may indeed look, but NOT perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand."

But why is he talking so much if he does not want everyone to understand? Would a contemporary preacher do that? Yes, there are ministers whose sermons are incomprehensible, but not intentionally so. This would be like a contemporary minister preaching to a congregation with the express purpose that they hear what he says but end up clueless about what he means. And that makes absolutely no sense. Why do that?

I believe there are two reasons. First, Jesus is trying to focus his disciples, and ultimately the crowds, to see that the words of the parables will always be incomprehensible as long as they focus on the words and not the key to deciphering the words. The key is Jesus himself. Jesus is trying to get them to look to who he is, how he lives, what he does as the filter through which they can hear and understand the parables. His life and ministry clarify the parables and their meaning. But that is also precisely the problem. Nobody, not even his disciples fully at this stage in Mark's gospel, want to live their lives the way Jesus lived his life. By this point in the gospel, he has touched lepers when the law says you should not. He has drawn women into his company, when tradition says you should not. He has forgiven sins, when the law says individual people like him and us cannot. He has sat at table and associated with tax collectors who defraud the people and prostitutes who immorally serve the people and treated them as though they, too, belonged to the household of God, when everybody knows they do not. He has broken the Sabbath law, not once, but twice, and added to that injury the insult that God's law was made to serve the needs of human beings, that human beings were not made to serve God's law. Who wants to be like that? Who wants to understand and accept a person who lives like that? If you have to touch untouchables, associate with undesirables, act like you can forgive people who bring harm and hurt, break laws and traditions that people you love hold sacred in order to be able to understand how this Reign of God operates in the world, then maybe it is better to recline peaceably in the dark than to walk fretfully into Jesus' light. You cannot understand Jesus' Reign unless you understand Jesus. You cannot participate in the movement of Jesus' Reign unless you participate in Jesus' strange, uncomfortable ministry. But you don't want that. Nobody wants that. Because the life Jesus lives is too hard. And yet, Jesus has got to keep them focused on his life, on his ministry. The cryptic, confusing parable--like this thing about mustard seeds--is a seduction. They will want to get it. But Jesus knows that they will not get it. But he also knows they will be beguiled, enticed, transfixed, drawn to the cleverness of the parable, seduced by the everydayness of the parable, the smooth, charming, simplicity of the parable, like people are drawn to a puzzle they have a hard time solving, or a mystery that seems impossible to unfold. Lured to the parable, like flying insects drawn to a bug zapper bright light, they will find him! And he will sneak a bolt of killer wattage right inside them.

This is the second reason Jesus talks in riddles he knows the crowds will not understand. Jesus intends to befuddle the crowds so he can sneak a subliminal, dangerous God message in past their intellectual and spiritual defenses. The African American slaves used to do this. Not only in their music, but often in their work. Work imposed upon them by their masters! Theologian Dwight Hopkins talks about the end of harvest corn shucking events, spectacles really, that many slave owners imposed as a way to make the harvest moment "fun" for the slaves. According to slave narratives, hundreds of slaves would often be massed together, sometimes from different plantations, before mountains of raw corn ears waiting to be stripped of their outer husks. Ingeniously, slaves often transfigured the work event into a playful competition. In coded, masked song, laughter, joking, and reverie, they did their work. At the same time they worked out their senses of self and identity in language and symbol that the master and overseer neither appreciated nor truly understood. Hopkins says: "What the master hoped would be a spectacle of buffoons and a theater of fools was seized by African Americans and re-imaged into a novel world of self-

knowledge and self-care.”¹ The slaves laughed before their masters. Under the guise of “fun,” the slaves even laughed at their masters. Sometimes the slaves even went so far as to deploy the language of ridicule and derision. The slave masters and overseers accepted it all because they were sure the slaves were too ignorant to conjure deception on such a sophisticated scale. It was all accepted as a part of the ritual reality. For the master the work event remained just that: childish, ignorant, ritual play. Only for the slave did it ever become something more: the conjure of resistance. Hopkins again:

They talked back to the master in their joking and “roasting” of him, his mistress, and their way of life. They claimed the master’s space in front of the master’s face. They usurped the power of decision making by choosing teammates in the corn-shucking context. They regulated the time needed to finish the shucking in order to take time to enjoy one another. They experienced a rare event: the power to eat from a massive menu, the right to choose which foods to eat, and the pleasure of having a feast cooked by someone else...They employed a rhythmic call and response way of being in the world when they sang throughout the ritual act...Movement and sound became acts of freedom.²

The corn-shucking event became the glimpse of a transfigured, free future in the midst of a seemingly static slave present. In the coded language, symbolism, and actions of disrespect, and in their camaraderie for each other, a radical future came alive. In the present!

Closer to our time are comedians. That’s right, comedians. I have been reading lately that some of the best comedians are angry and they insert their anger subliminally into their humor so that the anger slips past you while you are laughing, and over time the anger embeds itself in you and has a chance to change you because, while you are laughing, because you are laughing, you do not reject the anger. Just like while people were scratching their heads over the parables, but appreciating the beautiful story, Jesus was sneaking in a pointer to himself and his radical, dangerous ministry in a way people would not immediately reject. A recent CNN article about controversial comedian Richard Pryor makes the point. “There’s no question that comedy can be a form of escape—and recognition. Richard Pryor, one of the most brilliant comedians who ever strode on stage, was raised in a brothel, married multiple times, struggled with demons both societal and personal. He was ruthless -- especially on himself. Yet he was scathingly, mercilessly funny. It was comedy that drew blood...”³

Pryor was clearly angry at the way he perceived the U.S. Justice system operating unfairly against African Americans. So, to a black audience he quips, “Went to the courthouse looking for justice. Know what I found? Just us.” To a white audience, he reflects, “I went to Zimbabwe. I know how white people feel in American now; relaxed. Cause when I heard the police car siren, I knew they weren’t coming after me.” White comedian Lenny Bruce was angry about the communities in which children like him had to grow up. “I won’t say ours was a tough school, but we had our own coroner.” Kathleen Madigan is angry about the way our country disperses our domestic and international resources. She no doubt recognizes that while American cities are dying, the U.S. has now given more aid to Afghanistan than it gave to Europe in the Marshall Plan.⁴ When we’re finished fixing and saving Afghanistan, maybe we ought to invade Detroit. Mark Twain who was angry at just about every thing, had a special place in his heart for our national legislators. He wrote: “Suppose you were an idiot, and suppose you were a member of Congress;

¹ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 119–20.

² Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 120. 3. http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/12/showbiz/robin-williams-dark-side-of-comedy/index.html?hpt=hp_t1.

³ http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/12/showbiz/robin-williams-dark-side-of-comedy/index.html?hpt=hp_t1.

⁴ See Richmond Times Dispatch Article, August 2, 2014.

but I repeat myself.” These people paid to make us laugh are actually trying to get us to think. They are infecting us with righteous anger just as surely as the slaves were infecting their owners and themselves with justice and freedom, just as surely as Jesus was infecting his hearers with his ministry and the intent behind it. While they were thinking about mustard plants and birds lounging in the shade and looking at him for an explanation, he was showing them an explanation by the way he lived his life. He could not just come out and tell them what the Reign of God wanted; he had to slip it in.

While the master is celebrating the harvest, the slaves are sneaking in a message of justice and freedom. While the audience is laughing at jokes, the comedians are sneaking in messages of anger and transformation. While the crowds are mesmerized by Jesus' meanderings about mustard, Jesus is sneaking in a message of a kingdom of God's rule and God's way of being in the world choking out other kingdoms and spreading like a vegetative virus across heaven and earth.

Jesus knows what I think I know. People then and people now do NOT want the Reign of God choking out our ways of life and spreading like a vegetative virus across the earth. If the Reign of God is about touching contagious lepers (or Aids or Ebola victims), they do not want it?

If the Reign of God is about treating women as equal recipients of God's favor and human favor, where a changed world affords equal pay on the job, equal protection on college campuses, and equal peace of mind in homes freed from domestic violence, they do not want it. They certainly do not expend the effort to make the necessary legal and political changes to make it happen. If the Reign of God is about putting people and their needs above sacred tradition and law, especially laws that have the stamp of legislative and executive approval even as those laws stamp out hope for progressive education, broadened health care, and communal respect for every segment of the human community, they do not want it. If we aren't doing the work to change it, we can't honestly say we want it changed. If the Reign of God is about people accepting the things and the people that righteous, religious, and reputable folks cast out because they are dirty, different, diseased, disruptive, distraught, destructive, denounced, and displaced, they do not want it. If the Reign of God is about overturning the systems that turn people over to hunger and poverty, they did not want it. If the Reign of God is about the people who share so richly of their resources that the resulting abundance can feed and clothe multitudes with baskets left over, they do not want it. Not that Reign, not the man who came preaching that Reign. So, until it was time to make everything clear, he preached that Reign in a way that they could not see coming. He preached about mustard plants and comforting shade. While they did not understand the parable, they also did not fear it. So they kept coming, they kept listening, they kept looking, until at least some of them were infected with a viral message they never saw coming.

I know what you are thinking. You are thinking, but on the surface, this parable seems to be a simple contrast between the smallness of the seed and the largeness of the shrub. Joel Marcus interprets the contrast rightly, I think when he says: “For the dominion of God is like the word [of God]: paltry in appearance, but hiding a tremendous divine potency behind its apparent insignificance.”⁵ Almost like the dominion of God sneaks up on you because you did not see it coming. Not really. You certainly did not appreciate its power because you were so mesmerized by its apparent insignificance. Marcus also counsels that “The comparison is not just to the object that is immediately mentioned (here the mustard grain) but to the whole situation described in the parable.”⁶ And that is what I've been talking about. What is the whole situation?

In this nice little story about a tiny seed and a big shrub, Jesus slips in an infecting message of politics for people who do not want politics mixing up in their religion. Ched Myers argues: “There can be no question that this [parable] concerning the disproportion between the seed and the mature plant is

⁵ Joel Marcus, Mark 1-8 (vol. 27 of The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 322.

⁶ Marcus, Mark 1-8, 322.

meant to instill courage and hope in the small and fragile discipleship community for its struggle against the entrenched powers.”⁷

But struggle for what? For integration. In this case, the controversial integration of Jew and Gentile into the same worshipping, believing community. Anyone who heard Jesus’ parable in the context of the Old Testament would have understood that he was referencing Ezekiel 17:23 and 31:6, where the birds of heaven find shelter in the great cedar trees of Lebanon. It is particularly important that the phrase, birds of heaven, is a symbol for all the multitude of nations. In other words, the birds of the air may symbolize Gentiles.

This is particularly important information because at the time when Mark writes his Gospel, Gentiles have made themselves most unwelcome in the land; their greatest empire has devastated Jerusalem. A Roman force has occupied the city and laid siege against the Temple itself. Jewish zealots fight back furiously. The tension created by the Roman incursion ratchets up hostility between Jews and Gentiles all across Palestine. Amidst this horrific social scenario of ethnic animosity, instead of affirming the separation of Jew and Gentile, Mark’s community lives into Jesus’ mandate that God’s House is a house of prayer for all peoples by creating an integrated worshipping community of Jew and Gentile. Could it possibly be that this tiny seed of faith might one day become a shrub large enough to provide shade and nurture for integrated humankind? Could Jew and Gentile possibly serve God together? In Palestine? The parable suggests that the answer is yes? The parable does not just describe the world God intends; the parable provokes our participation with God in establishing the world that God intends. The parable slips in the infectious message that to follow Jesus is to extend the reach of this seed as far as possible. In our contemporary world where most mainline Protestant churches are still very ethnically and racially segregated, this parable becomes a provocative and unsettling message indeed. In our contemporary world where it seems the integration of peoples and faith in Palestine will never happen, this parable becomes a provocative and unsettling message indeed. The provocation goes even further. If Jews and Gentiles, if black and white, if people of every ethnicity and hue and color and station and place in life will make up the Reign of God when it is a full grown shrub, should we not be about the work of planting that mustard seed of religious and ethnic integration in every church, in every Christian, in every human being, in every circumstance we encounter right now?

See how this parable uses a mustard seed sleight of hand to requisition a radical way of living life. See how sneaky Jesus is. He takes his cue from the mustard seed itself. While you are looking at the tiny little seed and the comforting branches and leaves, I want you to focus on what the mustard plant is doing not above ground, but underground, with its roots. The thing tends to just take over. In his *Natural History* the ancient writer Pliny noted: “It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted; but on the other hand 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.” John Dominic Crossan observes that the point is not just that the mustard seed starts small and ends big, but that you just do not want it in your garden. Because it likes to get big by taking over.⁸ I do not know how contemporary garlic mustard compares with the mustard Jesus talked about in the first century, but it appears to have the same general take over qualities. Writing about it one horticulturalist notes: “If you haven’t heard of garlic mustard by now, here’s what you need to know: it’s evil. Garlic mustard is an invasive species that’s become the Kryptonite of Wisconsin’s forests. It starts growing as soon as snow is off the ground and takes off, out-competing

⁷ Ched Myers, *Binding The Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 179.

⁸ Quoted in Ryan S. Schellenberg, “Kingdom as Contaminant? The Role of Repertoire in the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2009): 528.

everything from oak seedlings to wildflowers. And here's why you should care: 'This plant has the potential to run rampant...'⁹

I don't know about you, but I don't like running rampant stuff. I certainly don't like running rampant people. I certainly try my best not to be one of them. I travel a lot, so I think about people running rampant at the airport, yelling at ticket agents. I don't want to be like one of those people. No one does. Until they become one. I heard the story recently of a man standing in line at an airline ticket counter listening while another passenger berated an employee about something over which the employee had no control. The man noted how the employee never became upset. When he got to the counter he asked her how she had been able to keep her calm. He said she told him, I wasn't as un-upset or gracious as I looked. He went to Dallas but his luggage went to LA. That's what you get when you're a running rampant nincompoop. I don't like running rampant nincompoops. I try to be the very opposite of that, sometimes to a fault. I don't want to upset the cart. There are times, if a server in a restaurant brings me something wrong on my plate, if the screw up is not too big, I'll just eat it. Don't want to raise a fuss. After all, didn't we just eat what our mommas put on our plate. We can eat whatever the chef puts on there too, right. Most of us are like that. If I say something stupid in the sermon, you don't jump up and shout, "you're crazy." You might walk out. People have. But that's an easy, cowardly way out. You don't make a scene, just make for the door. A mustard seed isn't like that. Horticulturally speaking, it gets up in the garden space and starts running its mouth. Horticulturally speaking, I don't think most of us want to be like that. Horticulturally speaking, I think most of us, if we had the opportunity to choose, would not choose to be a mustard plant. We would rather be a rose bush that looks beautiful, or a gardenia that smells beautiful, or an orchid that is so mysterious and exotic that everybody comes out to see us. If you're an orchid, you don't have to make a fuss to get attention, people bring the attention to you. Not the mustard seed; it takes its fuss on the road. It apparently changes everything and everywhere it touches. You see that when you stop looking at those branches that shelter the birds and start looking at the roots that give the branches their life.

Likewise, I want you to focus not so much on the topside of the church, or the topside of Christians, where the branches, and beauty, and shade are. You look at all that and you lose focus. Some times you even lose your way. Because churches and Christians, topside, often don't look right. They do look pretty. They do look powerful. They do look well to do. They do look influential. They do look orderly and peaceful. But do they look like the kind of running rampant, transformative take over transition away from how humans have things to how God wants things? Because that is what we are supposed to be. That's the message the mustard seed parable is, I think, sneaking in.

The mustard seed parable is suggesting that you may look small in comparison to the world's problems, the city's problems, your family's problems, but you are a part of an infectious kingdom on the spread. Run rampant into the world, the city, your family, your church with that knowledge, with God's backing. Live into that belief with the trust that when you run rampant with God's kingdom message, God's word and God's reality will spread, and the spread will take hold. In his commentary on Mark, Eugene Boring says it well: "It is true that the parable is a parable of contrast: the tiny beginnings of Jesus and Mark's own day will grow to fill the world and become the ultimate, all-embracing kingdom. But the reader must ponder whether the unconventional Jesus and his unconventional band of followers represented this kingdom." Do we? Do we represent THIS running rampant kingdom? Are we running rampant enough, making a fuss enough, threatening to take over enough to represent this kingdom?

What kind of plant are you? Don't look at your petals, your branches, how nicely dressed up you are, what kind of people come by to admire you, how nice you smell, how appropriately you speak--look at

⁹ See Catherine W. Idzerda, "Cutting the mustard: Fighting back against garlic mustard," <http://www.gazettextra.com/news/2008/mar/10/cutting-mustard-fighting-back-against-garlic-musta/>.

your roots. How expansive, how grabby, greedy, growing and gobbling up stuff are your roots? The more you gobble up what's here and run rampant with the vision of God's Reign to put its place, the more, you are as sneaky and as devastating as a mustard seed.