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**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**  
**June 13, 2021 Streaming Mass**  
**11th Sunday Year B**

Where do we see God at work in our world today? What are the signs of God's presence? Jesus answers that question when He speaks of the kingdom of God as being like "a mustard seed that has been planted in the ground." Jesus, of course, is speaking in parables. The problem is that we have heard these parables so often that they have lost for us their element of surprise. We think we have them all figured out. They are no longer able to shock us out of our complacency. So, we think that today's parable of the kingdom of God as a "mustard seed" is that the church starts with a small group of followers of Jesus and grows into the huge organization we have today. It is partly that, but it is much more than that. We have to imagine what this parable meant to those who first heard it, those people living in first century Israel who were very different from ourselves. So, let's try to go back in time and try to see how they first understood it.

Jesus was a preacher going from town to town announcing the message that something really new was going to happen. He described it as the coming of God's kingdom. Some took it literally, as if He was going to start a revolution against the Roman Empire and reestablish the nation of King David. What Jesus really meant was that God would be at work in their lives as never before. Most of His audience were simple farmers, so He spoke to them in language they could understand. Hence, His use of parables, where He took examples from everyday life, and then gave them a certain "spin" that left His listeners wondering what He really meant. He would be leaving to go on to another town, so He left His audience scratching their heads, giving them something to think about and something to talk about, until the next time they might see Him.

Today, when we hear these parables we often miss that "spin." For example, we often read the parables of Jesus in the same way we might read Aesop's fables. We probably have all heard Aesop's story of the race between the tortoise and the hare. As the story goes, during the race the hare took it easy, figuring he had plenty of time to catch up, but the persistent pace of the tortoise made the tortoise the surprise winner. The moral of the story is easily enough understood, "Slow but steady wins the race." Jesus' parables are not quite so simple. They don't always make sense, and that is the whole point. They are meant to raise questions, often troubling questions; to have people ask themselves what would I do if I were in the same situation; to wonder why some odd element was thrown into the story. In the end, the parables

leave the listener with the question, "Am I willing to be part of this movement, this community that Jesus is establishing?"

So with today's parable of the Kingdom of God as a "mustard seed." Why compare God's presence to a small bush, when the more traditional symbol of God's presence to Israel would be something like a majestic 40 foot cedar tree? Why would a farmer want a mustard tree, just a bush and essentially a weed, in his field? Today it would be like someone planting dandelions in the front lawn of their house. It makes no sense. Why would a farmer want the birds of the air to nest in its branches? The last thing a farmer would want is to attract birds to his field, where they would eat the new crop as it was sprouting from the ground. And, according to the Old Testament book of Leviticus, a farmer was not permitted to plant two different kinds of seed in the same field. In the minds of religious Jews, to do such a thing would be to upset the order God intended in creating the world wherein different kinds of things are supposed to be kept separate. This mixing of seeds would make the field "impure." How could something so "impure," so "unholy," be a sign of God's presence?

Jesus is telling his listeners that God's activity among them would not be what they might have expected. It will be at times a disturbing presence that may upset the socially accepted patterns of behavior. Those of his listeners who accept entrance into God's kingdom, those who desire to possess the new vision of life that Jesus was offering to them—the way of forgiveness, of acceptance, of welcome--will find themselves "getting in the way" of those who want to see things continue in the usual way—the way of self-interest, of retaliation, of the exclusion of what is different--just as the mustard tree would get in the way of the farmer as he was plowing his field. The followers of Jesus, because of what they said and how they acted, might often be viewed as a "nuisance," just as were the birds nesting in the branches. And finally just as the mustard seed did not really "belong" in the field of wheat, the followers of Jesus would be thought of as not really "belonging," as being "disloyal," because of their unwillingness to support the revolt against the Romans some years later. Jesus is telling His listeners that if they want to follow Him, if they want God to be at work in their lives, they will have to accept the designation of "outsiders" by those who hold the reins of power and authority in society.

The parables of Jesus, when we really hear them, are unsettling, even disturbing, because they challenge us to take a second look at our customary ways of acting. That should be no surprise when we remember that He who preached them was so unsettling, even disturbing, that He was nailed to the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. God is present in our world today in the voices and in the actions of all those who walk in solidarity with the weakest among us. As we receive the crucified

and risen Lord in the Eucharist, let us recommit ourselves to being a people whose symbol is this scraggly, annoying, disreputable mustard tree—a bush, a weed, an annoyance—and be just that for the sake of those who are tossed aside or left out by the powerful in our society.