

Smiling Jesus

Back in the 1970's, Playboy magazine caused quite a stir over one of the pictures it ran one month.

It's not what you might be thinking.

The picture that caused the stir was a picture of a laughing Jesus!

It wasn't that *Playboy* had run a picture of Jesus – what upset a lot of folks was that he was *laughing*.

It seems plenty of people just couldn't wrap their heads around it.

And when you think of all the old, and not so old movies depicting the life of Christ, from The Greatest Story Ever Told to Jesus of Nazareth to Jesus Christ Superstar to the Passion of the Christ, there's never a time when Jesus is laughing.

But if we want to have a shot at getting what Jesus is getting at in his parables; these odd stories that Jesus himself knows most folks won't understand; then we've got to wrap our heads around a laughing Jesus.

Because, he is often very funny, sometimes sarcastic, frequently dry witted and usually very much intending the pun.

Today's parable of the mustard seed points the way.

The temptation is to chalk this story up to something found in a Chinese fortune cookie: "Big things have small beginnings....."

But Jesus is way past that point with his bizarre little story that no one really gets.

You see, what the folks who first hear this story know that we don't know is that when Jewish people in Jesus' day think about kingdoms, they think about trees: big, tall, majestic trees.

We hear it in our first reading this morning:

"On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.

Under it every kind of bird will live;
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind."

And so the Old Testament prophets compare God's kingdom to a majestic cedar.

The Jewish leaders in Jesus' day think of the coming kingdom as a magnificent cedar; they think of themselves as magnificent cedars too!

It's a theme that Jesus picks up on, only to skewer it.

He compares the kingdom of God not to the mighty cedars of Lebanon, but to a weed; since the mustard plant is a weed; a useful weed to be sure; but a weed nevertheless.

I've heard it said that "mustard bushes grow like wildfire ... and they take over any field where they are planted. And on top of that, they stink!"

"That's what the kingdom of God is like," Jesus says today.

That's what those who belong to the kingdom of God are like too!

And, you just know he's grinning when he says it, because, "sign up with us: we stink and we're taking over" can only be said with a smile!

Jesus is all about rewiring how we look at each other, how we look at the world, how we define what is Really Real.

If humanity looks at kingdoms as big and strong and powerful and majestic,

God's kingdom looks more like a smelly weed;

or a seed planted, secretly growing while you sleep;

or a banquet for ruffians;

or like a lady hiding yeast in enough flour to feed a hundred hungry men.

No wonder so many walked away scratching their heads, trying to figure out just what the heck Jesus is talking about.

Somehow, this kingdom of God is weird, it's unexpected, and for some, it's just plain unwanted.

After all, when's the last time our opening hymn was: "A mighty mustard bush is our God!"

Where is Jesus taking us?

We know one thing, he's making liars out of the apostles.

You know, those are the guys who get taken on the side for the explanations.

"Do you understand?" he asks them.

"Yes," they lie - because they don't understand.

"Trust God in all things, with all things, for all things," seems to be the consistent message of Jesus; but the very next story after today's parable of mustard weeds and buried seeds is the crossing of the Sea of Galilee on the boat - you know the story - the storm comes up, Jesus is fast asleep; and the very disciples who just minutes before claimed to understand are freaking out and screaming at Jesus to WAKE UP WE ARE DROWNING!

They don't understand, and frankly nor do we.

Jesus can sleep because God is *in* all things, *with* all things, *for* all things: even in weeds, even in storms, even in lawsuits that go bad.

God is in stolen cars, and IRS audits, God is even in divorce, even in sickness, even in death.

The kingdom of God is not like the Queen's jubilee that wrapped up just last week in London.

That was all pomp and circumstance and gold and glitter.

The kingdom of God takes off the linen gloves and gets its hands dirty -- digging holes for seeds.

The kingdom of God sits with the five year old with leukemia over at Kapiolani Hospital.

The kingdom of God lives with our live-alone elders in their silences and memories.

The kingdom of God looks more like a field than a castle.

Do you understand?

Do I?

Not really.

It's a kingdom where water is thicker than blood, where family is those who follow, where the unclean are embraced and the unwanted are invited guests.

Dr. James Forbes, the senior minister at Riverside Church in New York City tells a story.

It's a story that helps crack open what it means to be continually cracked open by the God who seems to enjoy cracking all of us open to ever new and more insightful life:

"Years ago, when I was still living in North Carolina, someone said to me: 'Brother Forbes, do you think the gospel can be preached by someone who is not Pentecostal?'

"Well, I wasn't sure, for it was the only preaching I had ever known, but I imagined that it could happen even if I hadn't seen it or heard it. Indeed, I found out sometime later that it was so.

"After I had moved away from my hometown, someone said to me: 'Reverend Forbes, have you ever heard the true gospel from a *white* preacher?'

"Well, in theory, I knew it had to be true for God doesn't withhold the Spirit from anyone. Though I had my doubts that a white preacher could speak with power, I came to a point in my life where I had to say, "Yes, I've heard it!"

"Some time went by, and people began to press upon me the question of the ordination of women.

'Could the gospel be preached by a woman even though the holy scripture bid a woman to keep silence in the church?'

"I had to ponder this, for it went against what I had known in my own church and there was much resistance from my brother clergy.

"But I listened to my sisters and before too long, I knew the Spirit of God was calling them to preach.

"Who was I to get in God's way?"

"Sometimes we forget Jesus' promise – that the Spirit will lead us into all truth.

"Well, that must have meant the disciples didn't know it all then, and maybe we don't know it all now."

Just like Jesus upends our ideas of what God's kingdom looks like; exchanging a mighty cedar for a smelly bush;

Just so the Spirit upends who we find ourselves mingling with when we mingle with the people of God.

God, it seems, takes our best of intentions, our deeply held beliefs, our most treasured truths, and, like a weed, like a silently growing seed, invades, uproots and transforms what we think is good into that which our smiling God knows is best.

+amen

