

Humble Beginnings & Steady Growth—Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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[Genesis 29:15-28](#)

[Psalm 105:1-11; 45b](#)

[Romans 8:26-39](#)

[Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52](#)

It seems to me that today's lessons from Scripture are about two things: 1) humble beginnings and 2) steady growth.

If you're wondering what on earth is going on with our first lesson today with this guy named Jacob, working for a total of 14 years to marry the daughters of this other guy, Laban... well, remember this story is from Genesis, and Genesis, as the name in Greek suggests, is the story of beginnings, of ever so humble beginnings.

First, God chose Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, to be the unlikely parents of all God's people, and God promised that through them all God's blessings would flow. But at first the promise is very fragile. Abe and Sarah do have an unlikely son named Isaac. But there is a point where Isaac might be killed, even by Abraham himself. Though Isaac makes it and gets together with Rebekah. They have twin sons, Jacob and Esau.

And as you might remember in these strange, old stories of humble beginnings: Jacob, though the younger son by a few moments, with his mother's help, steals Esau's birthright and takes his father's blessing. And so, Jacob must run away, to escape the wrath of Esau. And while he's away, Jacob has lots of adventures. He tricks people, and he himself gets tricked. Jacob, having Isaac's blessing, is the one to continue the line of God's people.

But it is still so fragile! Jacob, as you know, will soon be renamed Israel by God. And all the sons of Israel are the twelve tribes Israel. The mothers of those twelve sons are these two women, the daughters of Laban, that Jacob must work his two weeks of years to be with.

These are very humble, strange beginnings, with very unlikely people, warts and all, who nevertheless carry God's promises and do God's own work. Our Psalm today has put it perfectly:

O offspring of Abraham, God's servant,
O children of Jacob, God's chosen ones.

The Lord is our God,
whose judgments prevail in all the world,
who has always been mindful of the covenant,

the promise made for a thousand generations:

the covenant made with Abraham,
the oath sworn to Isaac,
which God established as a statute for Jacob,
an everlasting covenant for Israel...

This is a reminder of both humble beginnings and steady growth. And speaking of which, how wonderful are the two gardens that both of our congregations are tilling and keeping! Humble beginnings and steady growth! And Matthew's Gospel only underscores our group efforts with all these agricultural and gardening metaphors in the past weeks—everything from sowing seeds, to weeds, to harvesting.

And today we have another plant-oriented lesson from Jesus: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." Again, this matches our theme: humble beginnings and steady growth! The same is true of yeast in bread, treasure buried in the dirt, and an ordinary net of string and rope that nevertheless catches fish.

But I always stumble a little bit when I think of mustard trees. First of all, the mustard seeds I know are just not that small. And they don't grow into much but a shrub. But, recently I had an insight into this metaphor of Jesus about how God works, about the kingdom of heaven. In the Ancient Near East they didn't really have anything like what we know as mustard—this translation is only an approximation.

But some scholars say that this plant which Jesus says is just like how God works is much more like what we would call Mugwort, or *Artemisia Vulgaris*, to use the Latin name. Speaking of humble beginnings, in our region this plant species is classified as both a noxious weed and an invasive species!

Just like Jesus says: its seeds are tiny, tiny. But once it gets started it simply will not stop growing. It propagates by seed, but it also spreads through its roots, through rhizomes under the ground that shoot up new stems all around. In fact, if you want to see Mugwort in action just take a walk up the hill to our garden. It lines all our entire property!

If you can't tell, I have to admit that I am officially obsessed with Mugwort. It's a fascination that started during the Covid lockdown when I began to notice *all* the plants that grew around where I lived in Philadelphia as Maddy and I would take walks to get out of the apartment. The more I researched it, the more fascinated I was.

In China and other parts of Asia it's cultivated not only as tea, but its smoke is used as medicine and it is still used in skincare. In Europe and Colonial America it was used for just what it sounds like, wort or plant for your mug, it was a bittering agent in beer, and some folks also called it Sailor's Tobacco. Martha Stewart has a recipe for mugwort soup! Roman soldiers used to put it in their sandals to revive themselves on long journeys. In Medieval Europe Mugwort was part of

the beginning of modern women's medicine, and is still used today by some midwives as a supplement that can aid in childbirth.

It is in no way particularly special, it is as humble as possible, and yet it is a stubbornly useful, beneficial plant. It grows absolutely everywhere. And you simply cannot get rid of it.

It hits kind of different if we think of *this, mugwort*, being like the kingdom of heaven. Humble beginnings mean exactly what it says: humble, yucky, ordinary. Steady growth I guess could also be characterized also as: unstoppable, underground growth. God's reign is as ordinary as a tenacious and helpful weed, and yet as priceless as a gem hidden in a field, Jesus says.

Understanding this paradox is the journey of faith that we are all on. How could something be so ordinary and so priceless at the same time? God started with a nobody named Abraham and after thousands of generations here we still are, we are conformed to the image of God's Son, so ordinary and yet so precious. Who, as Paul writes, was indeed the firstborn within a large family.

So, I, personally, take quite a lot of heart in thinking of God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, being like Mugwort. It's humble, it's ordinary, but it grows and grows and grows. It's *literally* medicine, it's everywhere, it's both ancient and brand new.

As the people of God gathered here, we are just not a people of fantastical beginnings and muscle and firepower. God's kingdom is not made of heroes and the morally perfect. We are the faithful elderly like Abraham and Sarah. We are the young tricksters like Jacob.

We are not prized tomatoes, bred and bred until we are too fragile to survive. But we belong to the kingdom of heaven, and it is like a mustard seed growing into a shrub that gives shade to the birds. It is like mugwort: Unwanted by most, but unstoppable; always overlooked and yet ever-present in the world; entirely beneficial and nevertheless absolutely free.

Amen.