

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 13:24–43. In this section of Matthew’s Gospel, our Lord continues to teach us about the Kingdom of God through the use of parables. As with all parables, the intended meaning is often found in the unexpected elements of surprise. Although these stories may seem like simple accounts from an agrarian culture, they are instructive and challenging for disciples of all times and offer several points for our prayer and reflection.

The first parable concerns that of a man who planted good seed in his field but while he slept an enemy came and planted bad seed. Rather than have his servants pull up the weeds, which might result in pulling up the wheat as well, the man instructs them to be patient and wait until the harvest time when the harvesters will be entrusted with the task of separating the good from the bad. There are distinct and precise details in this parable that will help us unlock its meaning and significance. First, it is interesting that the planting of the bad seed occurred while the man was asleep. In the New Testament, “sleep” is a metaphor for neglect (Mk 13:36, 1 Thes 5:6–8, and 1 Pt 5:8). This is an important caution for disciples. When we are not vigilant and discerning of what we allow to influence us, then bad seeds can get planted in our lives, our families, our marriages, our relationships, and so forth.

Second, when the parable goes on to speak about weeds, Jesus uses a term that specifically refers to a type of weed that looks very similar to wheat in its early stages of growth. Therefore, it is legitimately difficult to distinguish which one is a good plant and which one is a bad plant. That is a very good image for how evil works itself into our lives; it masks itself to look like something “good” in the moment and only reveals its devastating impact when we have complacently tolerated its growth for some time.

Third, the workers want to separate the good from the bad while the field is still growing, but the master commands them to be patient and tolerant. A time will come for separation, judgment, and punishment, but it is not their responsibility to carry out those actions in the present. Rather, it will be the responsibility of the harvesters (angels) to carry out this action in the future. This is an insightful teaching for us as disciples and reminds us that we are not given the power of judgment over others. As long as the field grows, there is always time for conversion. The definitive separation of good and evil will occur only at the harvest. Thus, patience and tolerance are Christian virtues that teach us how to live in a world that does not always embrace or accept the Gospel. This parable is a timeless reminder to the Christian community that the Church will never be completely pure. Although we see the ongoing presence of evil in the world (and in our own world), this parable assures us that there will be a final judgment.

What are some of the evil seeds that get planted in people’s lives and relationships today when they sleep and are not vigilant?

When have you seen some evil tendency, desire, or intention mask itself to look like something good?

How do we see today the tendency to make the Church a pure community of saints by removing anyone who sins?

How do you reconcile the teaching against intolerance with the teaching on active Christian witness?

It’s interesting that Jesus never gave the Church the power to condemn or curse but only to forgive and bless. When do you feel tempted to condemn or judge others?

How does this parable challenge you?

Why do you think Jesus thought it was important to tell His disciples this parable?

The second parable is of the mustard seed that becomes a tree. This is a really strange image to describe the Kingdom of God! The mustard bush was a common herb in the gardens of Palestine. It was never a tree and only grew to a moderate height (maybe 10–12 feet). That's what is so surprising about this parable. We must wonder why Jesus would use the image of a mustard bush to describe the Kingdom of God. You see, kingdoms in the time of Jesus did use the image of trees for self-description, but they always referenced trees that were perceived as symbols of power like the Cedars of Lebanon or the mighty Oak. To use the image of a mustard bush would have been a joke. Perhaps that's precisely the point. Namely, what the world considers insignificant and powerless is, in fact, God's work that will grow to greatness. The Kingdom of God may be overlooked now because it is small and ordinary, but it will grow into a glorious reality. Oftentimes we accept God's reign in our lives in very small and relatively insignificant ways. By doing so, the Kingdom grows within us until we eventually accept God's reign in large ways. If we wait for great challenges before responding to the small challenges of faith, then greatness will never come. By responding to the small challenges and relatively insignificant moments of faithfulness, we are encouraging the Kingdom of God to grow to maturity.

What are some of the small ways in which you can allow faith to grow in your life today?

What are some of the small ways in which you see God's will being accomplished in the world around you?

What are the ways in which people are tempted to look for the great manifestations of the Kingdom of God such that they end up overlooking the small manifestations?

Why do you think Jesus needed to remind the disciples of the importance of seeing the Kingdom of God in small ways rather than expecting it to always be manifest in great ways?

In what ways can disciples in the Kingdom of God be tempted to imitate the standards of power and glory manifested by secular kingdoms in the world?

Jesus may have had other reasons why He chose the image of a mustard tree for this second parable. The mustard bush was a common plant along the Sea of Galilee where it grew to a relatively small height of four to six feet tall. It was known as being a hardy plant, good for the health that germinated quickly and was capable of taking over a garden.^[1] Certainly there are reasons why this plant would be an apt description for the Kingdom of God. Aside from the small beginnings and enormous growth referenced in the first explanation of this parable, the mustard bush was also an image of perseverance (hardy) in adverse situations, good for people (Gospel), spread quickly and was difficult to destroy or eradicate. Lastly, Jesus points out that the mustard bush also bears a certain harvest because its branches provide shelter for the birds. Sometimes we think of this image as referring to birds' nests elevated above the ground in the branches. However, the mustard bush more commonly provided shelter for birds that lived on the ground and sought protection under low-lying branches. These birds were considered to be more vulnerable than others because they could not fly away in time of danger. This final insight points to the fruit the Church bears when it cares for the poor and vulnerable in our world as well. It is the harvest of charity that is a necessary sign of authentic faith and mature discipleship. The mustard bush may look healthy and vibrant, but it is only of value as it provides protection, security, and benefit for others. Such charity may not mirror the powerful kingdoms of the world, but it is a manifestation of God's reign.

What quality of the mustard seed do you think most motivated Jesus to use it as an image of the Kingdom of God?

How can disciples be tempted to be content with their growth and stop short of producing a harvest of charity?

In what ways do you think the description of a mustard bush by Pliny the Elder most accurately describes the Christian disciple (for example, "hardy", "good for health", "spreads quickly", "invasive", and "tenacious")?

^[1] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 78 AD. See the edition of Baldwin and Cradock, London, 1928.

Most people today are not very familiar with mustard bushes; if Jesus were to use a more contemporary image to communicate to us the same analogy for the Kingdom of God, what do you think it would be and why?

The third parable is about a woman who hides leaven in three measures of flour. Three measures of flour are a huge amount. It would be the equivalent of about fifty pounds! She is preparing a meal for a lot of people. Actually, she's preparing food for a great banquet: the banquet of the Kingdom of God. The surprising element of this parable is that she uses leaven in a positive way. Leaven (yeast) in the Jewish tradition and in the New Testament was traditionally a symbol for corruption, arrogance and pride (Ex 12:15–20, 23:18, 34:25, Lev 2:11, 6:10, Mt 16:6, 1 Cor 5:6–8, Gal 5:9). By using this image, Jesus is teaching us that God can even use human weaknesses to bring about His Kingdom. That is a powerful message! God used, for example, the ambition of Ignatius of Loyola to lead him to seek eternal greatness in God's glory (Lt: *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*). God used the youthful arrogance of Francis of Assisi to lead him to detachment from worldly concerns. God was even able to transform Paul of Tarsus from one who was filled with zeal to persecute Christians into someone who was filled with zeal to promote the Gospel (cf. Acts 9:1–19). Also, note that the woman hid the leaven in the flour. People are usually described as placing it in flour rather than hiding it. Our Lord is very clear in telling us that she hid it. That is because the Kingdom of God remains hidden to those who do not seek it, but to those of faith, the Kingdom of God is visible and active in the world and will grow to produce a huge result from a small beginning. Indeed, in the Kingdom of God, the Lord can use even our arrogant, prideful, and corrupt actions to accomplish His will. Saint Paul captured this truth well when he wrote, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more" (Rom 5:20).

How have you seen God use tendencies of human weakness, failure, or corruption as the means of accomplishing His grace and rule in people's lives?

When have you turned to the Lord in a moment of personal failure to surrender to God's will in your life?

When have you been surprised to discover God in unexpected places and circumstances of your life?

Why do you think Jesus needed to remind the disciples that the Kingdom of God is both present in the form of "leaven" and "hidden"?