

Ordinary #11B (Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34)

These parables are like God's joke in the form of an invasive species.

by [Nadia Bolz-Weber](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [Shiv0_0](#)

Recently I was telling a pastoral colleague that I have no idea how people become preachers without having first been stand-up comics. In the early 1990s when I was getting clean and sober, I worked for a few years as a stand-up comic; getting paid to be caustic on stage was cheaper than paying for therapy and had much the same result.

Now, 20 years later, I'm a Lutheran pastor. I have a pulpit instead of a mic stand, a congregation instead of an audience of drunks, and it is incense instead of stale beer and bad jokes that fills the air when I get up to speak.

Each of us preachers faces different challenges in writing sermons. Mine is to cut out most of the jokes from my manuscript before I preach. But it's hard because I just

find the Bible to be so darned funny. Especially parables.

We don't have to go far to find interpretations of parables that seem to suggest that parables can be solved—and that once solved they can offer us “instructions for living.” But parables aren't neat little moralisms dressed in narrative. They are meant to be swallowed whole. Parables are living things meant to mess with our assumptions and subvert things we never even thought to question. They are more like jokes than anything else, and as you know, to explain a joke is to make it no longer funny.

Maybe we are to experience the parable, rather than understand it. Really experiencing it is like being the person who laughs out loud inappropriately in public. That day in Palestine thousands of years ago, I bet there were one or two people who inadvertently laughed out loud at Jesus' mustard seed parable.

Very likely this crowd was aware of the Ezekiel passage for this week, in which God's action in the world, either despite or on behalf of God's people, was steeped in images of tall, majestic cedar trees. These are the most noble of all trees and an image of Israel's future greatness.

“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.”

I imagine that an image in which God is making you and your people the greatest and tallest and most majestic of all would be a comfort and hope to a people under Roman occupation. It certainly would have been a comfort to Ezekiel's original audience, which was in Babylonian exile at the time. So listening to Jesus speak of what God's kingdom is like could have been one heck of a pep rally for these folks.

They were familiar with Ezekiel's image of God making of them a mighty cedar under whose branches all the birds of the air would make nests. I imagine them listening in great anticipation as Jesus says, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes *the greatest of all shrubs*, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (my italics). Um, hold on—the greatest of all shrubs?

I can see everyone's jaw dropping, totally scandalized and offended, while one awkward guy in the back laughs out loud before realizing that no one else thinks this is funny. But it is funny. It's a joke. And as Frederick Buechner asks, "Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all? Heard as anything else, the gospel is the church's thing, the pastor's thing, the lecturer's thing. Heard as a joke—high and unbidden and ringing with laughter—it can only be God's thing."

Heard as a joke it can only be God's thing. And the joke is everywhere, sort of like mustard in Palestine (mustard, by the way, is a weed). These parables of Jesus are like God's joke in the form of an invasive species. God's redemptive work in the world is a wonderful joke on all of us. It's like kudzu. God's word has to be that way because the good news of this kingdom started with the destabilizing humor of a God who comes in the form of a servant. It began with the nobility and majesty of a homeless unwed mother, the joke of the royal greatness of a peasant from an insignificant town. It continued with the honor of God dining with whores and traitors. And the joke continues as a stately procession of a beaten criminal walking toward his execution and the gallantry of a God who dies a pathetic death.

And then there is the resurrection: the punch line to the greatest joke in human history. In the end God has defeated death itself while we are still offended by the joke.

So, dear preachers, as you proclaim the kingdom to your people, don't try and explain the joke. Just tell it. Those with ears to hear shall hear. One of them might even be you. But a lot of the times it will be that crazy guy in the back who laughs before realizing that no one else is laughing.