

Seed parables

By [Carol Kuniholm](#)

August 13, 2013

I've been doing battle lately with invasive plants that are taking over a park near my home. [Mile-a-minute](#), or Asiatic tearthumb (*Persicaria perfoliata*), is an annual vine with beautiful blue berries. Back in the 30s, a grower in York (two counties west of me) planted some holly seeds from Japan, and mile-a-minute grew up alongside the hollies. The grower found it interesting, propagated more, and now it's smothering fields and meadows in a constantly spreading circle hundreds of miles wide. Those beautiful blue seeds can linger in the soil for six years before germinating, and every plant produces hundreds of seeds, carried to new locations by flocks of hungry birds.

Mile-a-minute is prickly (hence the name "tearthumb"), but with gloves, not too hard to gather: it pulls off easily, and can be rolled into a ball. The difficulty is that it climbs over everything, far into trees, over bushes, out of reach of diligent weed warriors. Once it's seeded, seeds fly off when the vine is disturbed. Despite the efforts of a faithful band of volunteers, in [Exton Park](#) and areas beyond it seems to be winning.

[Purple loosestrife](#) (*Lythrum salicaria*) is the other thug we've been battling. It has beautiful flowers, butterflies love it, and it blooms for months, which is why it's still sold as an ornamental except in states wise enough to ban it. Some loosestrife is marketed as "sterile," suggesting it's okay to plant, but researchers have shown that the so-called "sterile" plants are as prolific as their peers.

The problem with loosestrife is that, grown on a continent where it has no natural insect predators, it takes over wetland habitat. It spreads from its roots, a foot a year in every direction, and seeds so prolifically (two to three MILLION seeds a year) that in just a few seasons there's a solid mat of purple haze. It crowds out everything: native grasses, fish populations, wetland birds. And digging it is hard, mucky work, since its roots are huge and it grows in wet spots, often under water.

The [Synchroblog](#) topic this month is "[Parable: Small Story, Big Idea](#)," and as I've been thinking about parables, it's occurred to me that quite a few are about seeds. In simple stories, Jesus catches the complexity and challenge of seed, and the

interplay of natural forces, human effort, inherent risk, distant reward.

Maybe the most familiar of the seed parables is the [story of the farmer sowing his seed](#) in good soil, rocky soil, hard soil. The seed on hard soil is eaten by birds. The seed on rocky soil grows fast, but dies prematurely. Some young plants are strangled by weeds, but some seed finds a home in productive soil and grows to produce good fruit.

I've seen firsthand how easily young plants, even trees, can be strangled by weeds. One of our weed warrior jobs is to chop back invasive vines that threaten the health of older trees, bend saplings into strange, contorted shapes, weigh branches toward the ground.

I've also seen firsthand how troubles and temptations strangle faith, which is probably closer to the point of Jesus' story. I've seen even mature believers sink under the weight of tragedy, or snap in the stranglehold of unattended sin. For young faith, the hazards are many, and it takes real care to help roots grow deep enough to face the pressures that will come.

Another parable is about [enemies who come to sow weed seeds](#) in a farmer's wheat field, and the farmer instructs his servants to let weeds and crop grow together, rather than disturb the wheat by pulling the weeds. Both will be harvested when fully grown: the weeds bundled to be burned, the wheat stored in the farmer's barn.

I remind myself of this parable when I fall behind in weeding my own small vegetable plot. But I'm fairly sure Jesus wasn't advocating sloppy gardening, but rather reminding his listeners: it's sometimes hard to see what's a weed and what isn't. It sometimes takes time and patience to recognize the good from the bad, the helpful from the harmful. And sometimes we aren't wise enough to know. And sometimes it isn't ours to judge.

A [third seed parable](#) is so short I can quote it here in full: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

Wrestling with purple loosestrife this past week, I found myself reflecting on the growth of the mustard seed, and Jesus' mention of the birds perching in its branches.

The mustard we know ([Sinapis hirta](#) or [Brassica juncea](#)) doesn't grow into trees. It's an annual plant that grows three or four feet tall. Sparrows or wrens might land on mustards, might even pick at the seeds, but you wouldn't call it a tree, and a bird would have trouble perching.

The mustard seed of the Middle East (*Salvadora persica*) grows into a small, multi-branched tree, with edible seeds, shoots that provide nutritious forage for camels, sheep and goats, and sweet fleshy fruit that can be eaten raw, cooked, or dried: great habitat for birds, and a welcome food source for a wide mix of hungry creatures.

In Jesus' very short, simple story, I hear the resonance of the [green equity](#) I wrote about last week: God's kingdom, as it becomes visible, is good news not just for those who follow him, but for all creation. As his restoration and goodness become evident, it provides space for even those creatures we've ignored, or crowded out.

The challenge is to sow seeds of the Kingdom, and provide space for them to grow.

We are constantly sowing seeds, sometimes wisely, more often foolishly.

And the impact of those seeds, while felt by us and those around us, is often multiplied in the natural world.

Mile-a-minute, purple loosestrife, kudzu, norway maples, Japanese honeysuckle, oriental bittersweet, *Phragmites australis*, the list goes on and on of plant species introduced in expectation of beauty, pleasure, financial reward. The harm to humans is sometimes in time and effort trying to control the runaway invaders; the harm to birds, insects, fish, habitat is far greater, pushing some species to the edge of extinction.

I've had the good fortune to hear [Doug Tallamy](#) speak at a nearby arboretum about the interplay of plant, caterpillar, butterfly and bird—and the danger to the ecosystem when native plants are replaced with plants from other places. He and his entomology students at the University of Delaware have done years of research on the feeding habits of insects, and have found that very few non-native plants provide essential food for the biodiversity essential to a healthy ecosystem.

We're often so busy sowing seeds that suit ourselves (the biggest flowers, the longest bloom) that we lose sight of the larger system, and the seeds we sow crowd

out the rarer butterflies, the songbirds dependent on bugs for food. And as some of those seeds become invasive and spread, they threaten the biodiversity, beauty, and function of the natural world.

But Jesus' discussion of seeds was not so much about physical seeds as about the seeds of the kingdom of God: the humility, love, patience and mercy that grow into wisdom, compassion, self-control, grace. Those seeds are choked out by the patterns of the day: fears of betrayal, grief over loss, self-protective anger, habitual cynicism.

And those seeds are strangled even more by the patterns of our life together: unabated competition. Constant judgment of those around us. Unrestrained consumption. Insatiable hunger for success.

The seeds we sow scatter far beyond us, rooting deep in our communities, carried along by social media to communities far beyond our own. Daily I find myself struggling to root out attitudes and ideas that have taken hold that have no place in the kingdom of God.

And daily I ask God to teach me to sow wisely: seeds that will bring nourishment, beauty, places of rest—not only to the people I love, but to the larger world beyond me.

Originally posted at [Words Half Heard](#). This post is part of the [August Synchroblog](#).