

Mustard you can't control (Mark 4:26-34)

It's a beautiful plant. It's also an invasive weed.

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In February, my husband and I drove up the Napa Valley from San Francisco to Calistoga's famed mud baths. Having experienced four deaths in one congregation in little over a month, we were seeking some much-needed respite. Once out of the city, we began passing waves of yellow mustard plants spread across the countryside, carpeting the bright green of spring with their brilliance. I basked in this welcome sign of renewal.

I found myself also looking, however, for signs of last fall's devastating Napa Valley fires. The stark TV images of charred land and blackened stumps of trees and fireplaces, lone standing sentinels, are seared on my mind. But that day I could find no evidence of the tragedy that left thousands homeless. Though the plight of the Napa Valley homeless occupied front-page news for months, it had now sunk to near obscurity. Yet, after five months, only the first few homes had begun construction. Nor was there any sign that housing for low- and moderate-income renters would ever become a reality. So, while I rejoiced in the bright spring growth, I could not help but wonder what darker scars the wild mustard might be obscuring.

Just recently, I learned that Spanish mustard seeds—whose plants now blanket the Napa Valley and much of the California coast—were first scattered in the 1800s by Father Junipero Serra on his way up the coast from Mexico to explore possible mission sites. Just as Johnny Appleseed bore apple seeds across the continent, so this band of West Coast explorer-conquerors spread mustard seeds. By the time the

priest and his band turned around to head back to Mexico, the mustard plants were in full bloom. Their yellow waves made a colorful pathway marking what would later become a trail of California missions.

Because I was an East Coast kid, the history of California missions merited little more than a page or two in my history books. So when I arrived in California at age 19, I welcomed the opportunity to explore these mission sites, to walk their red-tiled corridors and run my hands along their thick, white adobe walls. It was exciting to experience firsthand this piece of California history.

Over time, however, I learned how the priests who brought Christianity to California also pressed Native Americans into slavery, forcing them to convert. With the conquerors came diseases that led to the demise of much of these indigenous populations and nearly wiped out their proud cultures.

These days I have mixed feelings about missions. I am reminded of the controversy over the reevaluation of Civil War statues. As I struggle with these historical contradictions, the beauty of the yellow mustard flowers loses some of its brilliance for me. Light and dark, good and evil, are woven together through-out history—and through our own human actions as well. What might seem like the best of intentions at the time can nonetheless lead to unintended consequences we never have complete control over.

A similar tension between beauty and destruction runs through nature. The mustard seed, despite its springtime beauty, is a weed that spreads wildly, often to the detriment of nutrients needed by other plants. Invasive, pervasive, blown by the wind—once the mustard plant takes root, it takes over with wild unpredictability. It cannot be controlled. And yet Jesus chooses the mustard seed as a metaphor for the rule of God. David Lose says that God's reality, like the mustard plant, bursts out of control. God's reality "invades, overturns, and eventually overcomes the old one.... And it's definitely not safe, not, that is, if we're even minimally satisfied with the way things are." So be careful what you ask for.

Dark and light are there in the mustard plant, in history— and in us. Indeed beauty can sometimes grow out of the darkness that lies at its roots. Though for that to happen, the dark may need to be acknowledged. A complex intertwining of the beautiful and good, darkness and evil, lies at the core of nature and of human nature. Are they interdependent? Can one even exist without the other? And yet

there seems to be something about the human condition that makes us only capable of focusing on one side of the equation at a time. Our default mode seems to be either/or.

Perhaps the tension of paradox lies at the heart of God's rule. Maybe that is why in the Gospels Jesus tells such enigmatic parables to explain God's reality. The tension of living with paradox in the parables—as well as paradox in our own lives—unsettles us, keeps us guessing, pushes us off balance. Perhaps the best we can do is to acknowledge this tension. Maybe, even though it's uncomfortable, that is not a bad thing. It is a tension worth struggling with. Knowing and confessing that what we do and who we are contains the potential for dark as well as for light, we can face our actions with greater humility.