

Glad for chance to share what I love about Blue Ocean in my previous 3 sermons. I've discovered the lame duck is a happy one and a grateful one. Not having to focus on the future has opened up enormous space for gratitude for my past and present experience in this place.

Today, shift gears and comment on a parable David Gushee first applied to Blue Ocean in 2016. Gushee was the only evangelical leader/scholar at the time to support Emily and I back in 2014 and he paid for it. So he's a dear friend to our church. In his 2016 visit, he likened us to the parable of the mustard seed. Emily taught on this in the bird series, focusing on faith community as nesting place. Now it's my turn.

There are three versions of this parable: Mt., Mk. Lk, with slight variations. I'm using Luke 13, Sarah Ruden translation: ***Hence he said, 'To what is the kingdom of god comparable, and what shall I compare it? It's comparable to the seed of a mustard plant: a man took the seed and tossed it into his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the sky found shelter among its branches.'***" (Luke 13: 18–19)

In the Ancient Near East, "kingdom" was virtually synonymous with "empire" which meant ruled by a potentate, an autocrat on steroids. Rome was the empire *de jour*, coming after the Greeks and Alexander the Great, which succeeded Persian Empire ruled by Cyrus, which replaced Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar, in the wake of the Assyrian empire and I forget-his-name. Trees were a common symbol of empire in the A.N.E —Ezekiel has a vision of the Assyrian empire as a cedar of Lebanon. (Stanford logo: fear the Tree) So to compare the "kingdom of god" to a lowly mustard plant is an intentional contrast to the grandiose power of earthly empire. This pertains today as we're in a resurgence of an old heresy by which the church fawns over the raw power of empire—in days of yore, the Roman empire, the Russian Imperial empire, the British empire, German Christianity's support of the 3rd Reich. The greatest distortions of Christianity are tied to a fatal attraction to empire and its authoritarian rulers. The war crimes of Putin are supported by Russian Orthodox church. Here, Christian nationalism (what David Gushee calls "authoritarian reactionary Christianity") is marked by a cult-like fetish for autocrats (Hungary's Victor Orban) and other pals of our own home-grown demagogues

Churches like ours are popping up as a contrary witness in a sea of authoritarian reactionary Christianity enamored with the golden calf of empire. Our parable: ***To what is the kingdom of***

god comparable, and what shall I compare it? It's comparable to the seed of a mustard plant: a man took the seed and tossed it into his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the sky found shelter among its branches.” Jesus is sparking a movement that is anti-grandiose, anti-autocratic, without secret salutes—from a small seed tossed or cast into a garden producing a bush he calls a tree in which birds find a nesting place, a shelter.

Luke's version alone says the seed is “tossed” or “cast.” The other versions use the normal Greek word for sown—the thing you do with seed. But for some reason Luke chooses a different Gk. word, translated *tossed* (Sarah Ruden) or *cast* (David Bentley Hart); it has a forceful connotation—like cast out. Some historical background might account for Luke's word choice. Stick with me here. Luke is probably Jewish and writing from the Jewish diaspora, meaning small Jewish enclaves living not in the land of Israel, but scattered throughout the nations of the empire. (Our translocal members are our diaspora.) These Jewish communities were granted an extraordinary exemption from participation in the emperor cult. No other sub-group in the Roman had this exemption. And these Jewish communities were immersed among Gentiles, many of whom were drawn to the Jewish way of life, and the one God of Israel. These were called “god-fearers”—Gentiles loosely affiliated with the diaspora synagogues but still expected (by the synagogue) to participate in the cult of the emperor—hence, no threat to Rome. Typically, only a few converted to Judaism because it required circumcision—a procedure adult males were not rushing to subject themselves to in the ge before sterile technique and local anesthesia. You can uncross your legs now.

Luke is also the author of the book of Acts, focused on Paul's work among the Gentiles. Paul is the Jewish apostle (messenger) to those Gentiles already loosely affiliated with the synagogues (the god-fearers, who continue to participate in the emperor cult.) But based on his mystical vision of the risen Jesus, Paul introduces an innovation: he believes that with the resurrection, a new age is dawning, what in Judaism is called “the world to come.” And as a good Pharisee, Paul knows the Hebrew prophets who said, in the world to come, the nations will abandon their idols and worship the one God of Israel, without converting to Judaism, per se—and thus God will be the God of all (not just of Israel, but of all the nations.) This is the reason Paul opposed circumcision for the Gentiles (while supporting it for the Jewish people, including messianic Jews.) We tend to forget this was all happening in proximity to, maybe even in affiliation with the Jewish synagogues of the diaspora. Paul was conducting a bold experiment in multiculturalism—recognizing difference (not a melting pot, everyone absorbed into one culture) but Jew and Gentile respecting and embracing each other's

difference while enjoying full equality (no discrimination allowed.) Turns out this is the key principle of affirming theology & practice: recognize, accept, respect, embrace difference, but insist on full equality, which means no discrimination. Anything else is a violation of the bold experiment launched by the resurrection of Jesus, sign that that world to come is dawning now.

But here's the rub: this new influx of Gentiles abandoning the emperor cult to worship Israel's god created a problem for the synagogues in the diaspora—which, remember, enjoyed that special exemption from nationalistic idol worship. Large numbers of Gentiles laying claim to the special exemption given to the synagogues, would not make Rome happy.

The synagogue rulers, seeking to protect their Jewish community from Roman persecution would naturally want to put a stop to this, which meant tossing out this Jewish-Gentile subgroup still attached to the synagogues. (This is understandable and doesn't even begin to compare with the persecution the Gentile dominated church eventually visited on the by-then-much-smaller and more vulnerable Jewish communities in the empire.)

That whole scenario may account for Luke selecting the term “tossed” or “cast out” for the mustard seed in his version of the parable. In a sense, we are tossed mustard seed too. Of course, we got the heave-ho not from any synagogue rulers. To the contrary we were embraced and welcomed by Temple Beth Emeth, our in-person host synagogue. No we got heave-ho from Christians. But all's well that ends well. We were cast, like the mustard seed, into a garden—a peaceful, fruitful place, a place of safety (Gk. Sozo). Now we can say, “The lines have fallen for us in pleasant places.” Just a little mustard seed at first—the smallest of the seeds—but we became a tree that the birds of the sky could build their nests in. Still: Nothing grandiose here: we're not the Blue Ocean World Outreach Center, aping a so-called Christian empire, what my old pastor used to call “the stumbling monster of Christendom.”

Let's turn now turn to the quirkiest part of this parable—one that has mystified interpreters for ages: ***To what is the kingdom of god comparable, and what shall I compare it? It's comparable to the seed of a mustard plant: a man took the seed and tossed it into his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the sky found shelter among its branches.***” It's a mustard plant, like you'd expect in a garden. But wait, now it's a tree?! Mustard was a garden plant—an herb-garden plant at that—at most a bush, but not a tree. We gloss over these differences because to us, mustard is in aisle 7 next to the mayonnaise. I have to pull my plant ID app up to know what any green thing growing in the ground is. But

ancient Israelites knew their plants and their classification. King Solomon is celebrated as a botanist who classified many plants.

Matthew's version is also confused about mustard plant identification. "*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in a field [not a garden, where herbs belong] **but when it grows it is larger than the garden herbs and becomes a tree...***" When Matthew inserts that "but" he's emphasizing that like that song your parents were listening to before conceiving you, goes, "There's something happening here—what it is, ain't exactly clear!"

Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the NT says: "something has gone very wrong; mustard does not grow into giant trees; birds don't nest in mustard plants, because the plants are too close to the ground, and so are the animals with a taste for eggs." So this is not a normal mustard plant ... and it's not a normal tree. It's neither fish nor fowl—it's category bending if not breaking.

When we organized in late 2014, there were only a handful of congregations like ours, and we probably knew about most of them—today, there are many, many more. What do I mean by "congregations like ours?" I mean ones tossed out of evangelicalism, but which did not affiliate with the only sector that allowed for affirming congregation, mainline Protestant: UCC, Disciples of Christ, PCUSA, ELCA, Episcopal. When we first launched, the rector of St. Clares wanted us to explore becoming Episcopal. More tempting for me than for Emily. (I was like, Emily, they have a great retirement benefit!) We love our Episco-pals—me especially since I'm married to one. But we are not mainline Protestants.

We owe a lot to mainline Protestants—until just recently, the only sector of Christianity with any place for affirming theology and practice. The only place where different sexualities and gender identities can be recognized, accepted, respected, and embraced without any discriminatory practices, in keeping with Paul's multi-cultural experiment launched in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. But while some mainline denominations have affirming national policies, all this is still contested at the congregational level. Roughly half of the congregations in the first affirming denomination UCC are not affirming. Ordination of women is still a contested issue at local level. Many mainline congregations in affirming denomination are free to discriminate on the basis of sexual and gender difference.

Just as we need the mainline denominations to keep bearing witness in their global networks—to help put an end to harmful polices where they still exist within these

denominations, we also need places where this is no longer contested. We need havens from all that bru-ha-ha, especially in this time of cultural back-lash. We need faith communities like Schitt's Creek, where people are just quirky people, and none of this is contested in the motel, the restaurant, the gift shop, anywhere in Schitt's Creek.

So, in a very real sense we represent a new sector (albeit an embryonic one): not evangelical, not mainline Protestant. Something that's bending or breaking old categories, like a mustard seed that becomes a tree instead of the bush it was thought to be. There are advantages that the mainline denominations have that we don't but there are things we can do that are hard to pull off as a mainline congregation: we're not tied to an old building, we're more nimble in responding to a changing cultural landscape. Close to my heart as theology buff: We can develop theologically in ways mainline congregations can't. Solus Jesus doesn't really fit in evangelical or mainline theology. Susan King showed up, part of an order that includes practices that survived in the lesser-known easterward expansion of the gospel into Persia, India, China, because we have room for the treasures Susan brings from that ancient tradition, like appreciation for Sophia (divine feminine that was part ancient Judaism, but later suppressed.) Susan could find a theological home with us that she couldn't find elsewhere. We have room for Caroline Kittle's appreciation for midrash and second temple Judaism. We can be enriched by the insights of Black Liberation theology, and indigenous understandings of Creator and Creators precious world. What a gift all this theological diversity can be to us! The earliest gospel, like ancient Judaism itself, was part of a multi-vocal tradition, embracing a lot of theological diversity.

The pastors know who lead congregations like ours—tossed out mustard seeds that are no longer evangelical, but also not mainline Protestant—are marked by similar intuitions to move beyond the confines of theologies sourced in mostly white, mostly male perspectives. Truly, there *is* something happening here, even if what it is ain't exactly clear—but it's clearer than it was and it's definitely something, not nothing.

It's my final sermon, I can take some liberties. Gaining a foothold such we have, is not an easy thing. Pioneering is not an easy row to hoe. Many people who find us are surprised we exist, which means they weren't exactly looking for us, the stumbled upon us, looking for something else. But we have become a sign of real hope for people who cannot shake their God itch, but cannot get it scratched in other places either. And the mere fact we exist matters a great to a lot of people in a lot of places far and wide. More importantly, this sector that we are a small part of matters a great deal to many more people. Emily and I have been

in touch on a regular basis with people who want to know, is there a church like yours where we are? Rebecca Farlow, who does a podcast with Justin Lee, reached out to me to say, “Can you send me a list of churches like yours—I want to interview some of them” We hear from tender and noble souls who cannot find a safe-for-them faith community, and they say, “I just want you to know, I take so much hope from the fact that you even exist. I didn’t know such a thing was possible.” Well, we didn’t either until you all came along since the end of 2014. Caroline Kittle as our newcomers pastor and Diane Sonda, are getting now a regular stream of stories from people who find us and say, “I didn’t know such a thing existed! I’m so glad you’re here.”

Plus we know a whole slew of people, who are still recovering from their religious trauma and can’t yet be part of any faith community, until they can learn to trust themselves again not be hoodwinked. The fact that we exist, is a little ray of hope that they can one day reconcile their hunger for a divine connection, their affection for Jesus, and their longing for community.

It’s really important that churches like ours exist on the faith community landscape. It’s really important for a just society to have faith communities leaning into justice, informed by the Hebrew prophets, inspired by Jesus of Nazareth, scapegoated, crucified and risen as witness to the hope of the triumph of justice on the earth. We need the power of Spirit along with well marshalled facts, and persuasive discourse, and science, and advocacy, because the pursuit of justice is at its core a spiritual quest and we need all hands on deck.

So if you want to bless me upon retirement after my long tour of duty as a pastor, bless this church that I love If you’re already doing a monthly donation and want to bump it up for the next year as we emerge from Covid into a newer normal, when churches are rebuilding including ours, what blessing if you can do that. Or start a monthly donation, whatever you want it to be, if you’re in a position to do that. Or send Blue Ocean a one-time gift, whatever floats your boat. And by the way, thank you in advance for the cards and well wishes and videos, your presence here today, and making this such an honoring and lovely send off. I feel loved.