

Story and Meditation: Growing Things

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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Mark 4:26-34

by *Eric Anderson*

This is the story of the ohī'a seed that did not want to become a tree.

I would think that that's an unusual thing, and it has to be said that, among the many tiny seeds in the little capsule, it was the only seed that did not want to become a tree. Before the capsule opened there were many discussions about this peculiarity.

The truth is that the seed liked being a seed. It felt like it was just the right size, even if that size was very small. It couldn't imagine becoming a swaying tree, or having its branches far away from its roots. It couldn't imagine what it would do with a great big trunk or having so many branches that it would lose count. Most of all, it enjoyed its near weightlessness. It just felt light and free, and light and free are not things you usually say about a tree.

When the seed pod split open, the seeds were caught by a strong breeze and scattered hither and yon. The ohī'a seed that did not want to become a tree looked down from its height – the pod had grown near the top of a rather tall tree – and concentrated on lightness. Lightness. If it fell to the ground, it was sure it would become a tree, and a tall one at that. The soil below looked rich beneath the greenery.

Even thinking lightness, though, couldn't hold off the summons of gravity for terribly long. The seed dreaded its descent into the soil. Before it came to earth, however, the breeze carried it away from a kipuka out over a cooled lava field, one of those between Mauna Ulu and the pali. Instead of greenery below, the seed saw dark gray stone. The breeze dropped, and the seed fell into a small crack amongst the paho'eho'e. It rested, content, with a few grains of black sand that were actually bigger than the seed itself.

"I'll never become a tree from here," it thought.

For some time, it remained a contented seed. A day came, however, when some combination of new sand, moisture, chemistry, and maybe even the temperature that day caused the seed to feel like stretching. It didn't have any limbs to stretch with, so it created some – and now it had roots.

It stretched some more, and it had a rising shoot.

"Oops," it thought. "Now I'm growing. I hope I don't become a tree."

Weeks, months, and years passed. The shoots emerged from the crevasse in the rock and put forth spindly branches. The roots gradually broke up more of the rock below to get a better grip and to drink up the rainwater. All that was fine – as long as it didn't become a tree.

It felt like stretching again one day and, to its astonishment, flowers began to bud and soon enough to bloom. "Only ohī'a trees blossom," it said aloud, which caused a passing bumblebee to stop and stare.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I never wanted to become a tree," said the ohī'a, "and now I'm blooming."

The bumblebee buzzed around the rather small and spindly plant, which was no more than a foot or so high, and came in to land on a particularly nectary flower. "I don't know why you don't want to become a tree," she said. "Blooming or not, I wouldn't call you one anyway."

She flicked a wing in the direction of the kipuka he hadn't landed in some time ago. "In there, there's trees," she said. "They've got flowers way up in the sky. But here," and she took a good sip of nectar as pollen rustled back and forth between bee and flower, "you're close to the ground. That makes for easy flying, I say."

"I never meant to do any of this," said the ohī'a.

The bee thought about this. "How many of us do the things we think we'll do?" she asked. "I'm a bee. I collect nectar and pollen. But how would I know where I'll do it? I could have been high up in a tree today, but here I am with you. Who could have predicted that?"

"And how can you predict what will happen when these flowers become seeds, and the seeds are carried away on the wind? Some might become trees; others might rise just a foot or so."

"I guess," said the little ohī'a, "we find out how we grow as we grow."

As stories go, it's not a complex one. You can say that about my story of the ohī'a seed, and about Jesus' story about the grain growing in the field. As Matt Skinner writes at Working Preacher, "No other Gospel contains this parable. Probably because it's boring. Its plot has all the suspenseful drama of an ordinary elementary-school life sciences textbook. There are no surprises. Everything proceeds according to plan. Jesus simply speaks about seeds and what they are supposed to do. They grow and produce. Moreover, they grow and produce without your help or your intricate knowledge of germination or photosynthesis or palea, thank you very much."

I had to look up "palea," and found that it is: "the uppermost of the two chaff-like bracts that enclose the grass floret (the other being the lemma)." At which point I realized that the

definition of the word I didn't know included two words I didn't know, and decided that it's the wrong Eric talking to you about plants, and I refer you to Mr. Tanouye.

Jesus' second story isn't much better, and in some ways a little worse. Agriculturally knowledgeable hearers –I'm relying on others' scholarship here – would have listened to the story of the mustard seed with growing astonishment. Mustard in the first century was a weed. As Richard Swanson writes in *Provoking the Gospel of Mark*, "As any farmer can tell you, it is impossible to have a little mustard in your field. Mustard is uncontrollable and disorderly, and as such it embodies an offense against Torah observance in a chaotic world."

Jesus chose to compare the realm of God to the slow and common growth of a seed on the one hand, and the spread of a rather unsightly, generally undesirable, and essentially uncontrollable weed on the other.

He was making some sly points. Sharon H. Ringe notes at Working Preacher that "The almost predatory ability of the mustard plant could crowd out the planned crops of the Romans, even sheltering birds that could be trusted to gobble up more of the carefully planted seeds, no doubt gave a chuckle to people delighted by subverting the economic enterprises supporting Rome's imperial agenda. Good news: God's empire has many ways to carry the day over powers bent on their own profit and power!"

You and I might find some comfort here in this week when we've learned from Pro Publica that the 25 richest people in the United States have not only paid a ridiculously low proportion of their income in federal taxes, but in some years have paid nothing at all.

It might be comforting and it might be amusing, but it is certainly not triumphalist. It is certainly not the message of the great military and political Messiah, the leader of the triumphant restoration of the ancient nation of Israel.

It also doesn't fit with a neat, respectable Church. Mind you, as I look around at the various embodiments of the Church of Jesus spread across the world, an orderly stand of great trees is not the image that comes to mind. For all our attempts with the architecture of churches and cathedrals, the Church is a much messier creature, taking so many forms that non-Christians are basically forced to make assumptions about all of us based on the assertions of some of us. And yes, just as shrubs compete for water and soil and sunlight as their branches intermingle, the same is true of the Church, and that messy interaction is visible to everyone.

The life and growth of the Realm of God is not under the direct control of anyone but God. "The earth produces of itself," Jesus said in the parable. The realm of God grows of itself.

The Church is not precisely the same as the Realm of God, but its growth is not under the direct control of the Church. It can be influenced, perhaps even accelerated or slowed by its efforts, but the Church also grows of itself. That is its nature.

It is also its nature, apparently, to grow unpredictably, sometimes undesirably. The Realm of God and the Church can look more like a weed than nurtured plant. The remarkable thing is that they fill the same function as the image of ancient Israel: the great cedars that gave shelter to the birds of the air. In Jesus' story, those same birds found home in the bristling growth of the mustard.

These parables are warnings that the Christian faith is not about sudden miracles, but about growth over time. These parables are declarations that Christian faith is not about what we expect, but about what grows. These parables are statements that in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end, the Christian faith finds its growth in God.

We know that we are growing creatures in our lives as individuals. We are also growing creatures in our life together as people of the Christian faith. Growth comes to us from God – and for that we give God thanks.

Amen.