

What Words Can Hold
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The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
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“You can read, Kya. There will never be a time again when you can’t read,” he said. “It ain’t just that.” She spoke almost in a whisper. “I wasn’t aware that words could hold so much. I didn’t know a sentence could be so full.” He smiled. “That’s a very good sentence. Not all words hold that much.” Those words come from a novel *“Where the Crawdads Sing”* by Delia Owens. They are an early exchange between the main character, Kya, and Tate, an older boy who teaches her to read.

“I didn’t know a sentence could be so full.” As with many of the words in this novel, I found myself caught between wanting to keep reading the story and wanting to savor each sentence. It is a novel I found “so full”, as with Kya’s wise words: “I didn’t know a sentence could be so full.” And I think this piece of Owen’s novel is a way to think about Jesus’ parables, including our gospel reading this morning - the mustard seed as we call it. It is told in 3 of the gospels and its shadow could be seen in John’s “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” In all the versions, there is a seed and its transformation into something larger and more abundant.

If we pause to consider, all of Jesus’ parables are like that, even as the particulars change. Simple, ordinary things - vineyards, merchants, laborers, yeast, coins and sons - are given words and gathered into sentences. And the hearers, then and now, “didn’t know a sentence could be so full.”

As with others around the world, we Christians love a good story and Jesus’ parables are good stories. They present the hearer with core, universal human concerns - what is fair, how to right a wrong, when to forgive, how to love, whom to include. These concerns are part of everyone’s life and Jesus’ parables give them flesh and bone to struggle and celebrate in relationships. Such full stories. So full. And over the years, they have become even fuller.

Books have been written. Bible studies have been taught suggesting what the parable words mean, what Jesus meant. We have packed the words in these stories to the brim as with the one this morning. Is Jesus using the small seed, branches and birds to tell us that small grows to larger? Or is Jesus telling a symbolic story, making the seed equal faith and the birds nesting in the tree represent eternal life? Those are two of hundreds of interpretations as with all of Jesus’ parables.

Such is the stuff of commentary books and one of them is written by Amy Jill Levine. Levine describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Christian divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt”. Her book, *“Short Stories by Jesus”* attempts to peel away some of the “fullness” and suggest possible meanings Jesus may have had as a 1st century Jew. She submits that we have tamed Jesus’ stories, smoothing out the rough, difficult edges. In her words, they have become more “a pep talk than provocation.” (P. 21). Also she thinks Jesus tells parables, not tales of deep symbols needing decoding that could only be understood decades after his death.

They are meant to challenge stereotypes, biases, narrow perspectives. They present us with the hard work of reconciliation and deciding what has priority in our lives. And again and again, Levine pushes against our tendency to use the stories as just Jesus' criticism of his own Jewish traditions and community - more of an early church's issue than Jesus. Nor is Jesus creating stories which merely mirror the commonly accepted way of life. Jesus gives his hearers more credit and dignity than that. There are no easy parables. No, Jesus is serious and the parable seeds he sows need deep roots, some digging around and the courage to stretch beyond what is assumed and comfortable.

So what does Levine do with the mustard seed? She takes the story at face value. "Sometimes the seed is just a seed, a bird is just a bird, and a tree is just a tree. (P. 180). All of them are part of the good world God has given us. They share God's gift of life along with us. And going deeper, Levine suggests that God's gifts in this story are able to give from their fullness when left alone! Our human tendency to mess with nature can make a mess of nature. Seeds do their part best when left to do their part. Jesus uses a whole ecological process in this story - in fact, in many of his parables. Jesus offers a fundamental trust in a process bigger and more abundant than we tend to operate from. A seed, a tree and birds can remind us that we live in a cosmic web of life, given and designed by God, to sustain us - and yes, even be more than we could ever provide. If we stretch beyond our assumptions and comfort, to let go and even get out of the way, our actions will bear fruit beyond what we could desire or ask for.

"I wasn't aware that words could hold so much. I didn't know a sentence could be so full." Yes, Jesus tells parables with words and sentences which are so full. They guide, challenge and affirm life for the one who spoke them is himself a parable. Jesus is the Word whose very life gives others life, an abundant life. Like the seed becoming a tree as home for all, Jesus' life and death offer this same gift.

So, let's put Levine's insights to the test: do they connect with our lives? Do they ring true? I tried to answer those questions and give you a story at the end, but I honestly couldn't think of a situation - from my life or another or from the news - in which people trusted the process and didn't feel compelled to get in there with some kind of action. Giving advice. Telling their own story. Making a correction or judgement. Immediately planning the next move. Offering a solution without permission.

As I sat with this assignment of ending with a story that mirrors Levine's interpretation of the mustard seed, I came to realize that I rather liked the acceptable ones - smaller grows to larger or as symbols of faith's journey to eternal life. Those don't confront me with full words and sentences. No, the parable seems lean and stale - we already know that.

Yet, with Levine's insights, I discover my need to trust that situations are held in a large web of life.. My eagerness to act could be tempered by humility. My quickness to assess might reveal my own discomfort with allowing space and time for wisdom to unfold. The roots of patience might have a breathe of a chance to grow deeper. Jesus, as the Word in me could hold so much more. Amen.