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Years ago I was excited to get a new cookbook, one of the Moosewood cookbooks, full of interesting new recipes to try. The recipes called for ingredients that were unfamiliar to me, including one vegetable I had never seen before: fennel. I'd run across fennel seed in bagels and sausages, but I didn't know the vegetable. So I was excited to serve an orange and fennel salad from my new cookbook one day when my friend Dave came over to dinner. Little did I know Dave was all too familiar with fennel. In the East Bay where he'd spent part of his growing-up years, he had had to root out the fennel that grew wild in his family's yard. It turns out that in Dave's experience, fennel was a weed. (Happily he took a chance and enjoyed the fennel salad).

Now when people heard Jesus talking about mustard, they would have reacted like my friend Dave: Mustard is a weed! Mustard is a pain! How can God's kingdom be like a mustard seed? Actually it's worse than fennel. A mustard seed would slip into a batch of good seed undetected, and it would end up sprouting among the plants a farmer wanted to grow. Mustard wasn't part of the farmer's plans. It didn't grow up in nice neat rows; mustard crowded out other plants, taking up valuable space in people's gardens. And yet Jesus tells us this unwelcome plant becomes a place of shelter and nurture. That's what the kingdom of God is like—breaking in unexpectedly, upsetting our carefully laid plans, growing beyond what seemed possible, and providing shelter where there was none before.

Or consider this: Have you ever made bread? When I make bread, I go to the tap and run warm water, and measure some out with a measure of yeast from a jar or a packet, and maybe add a little sugar or honey to encourage the yeast so that it bubbles and foams, and then I can add the flour. But in Jesus' day, of course, there was no tap water at 110 degrees, and no Fleischmann's cultured yeast down at the grocery. In fact, when Jesus talks about LEAVEN, he's not talking about yeast at all. He's talking about an old bit of bread dough saved from the last batch of bread, something we'd call "starter"—it's how we make sourdough bread. And this starter, this leaven, was considered unclean, because it was basically something ROTTING—or fermenting, really. It wasn't HOLY BREAD—Jews used unleavened bread for their holy occasions.

But Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a fermenting blob of old bread dough that a woman works into three measures of flour—enough for 100 loaves—enough for a feast. The action of the leaven, of course, makes the bread rise—that is, the bread dough fills with air, because as the leaven breaks down the carbohydrate in the flour, it produces carbon dioxide gas. And I don't want to take this metaphor too far, but I can't help thinking how this filling up the dough with air is a little like an infusion of the Holy Spirit—the air in the bread a kind of breath reminding us how the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, works into our lives...

So the kingdom of God is also like this: a common woman takes common flour and an unclean lump of dough and works until the Spirit grows them into food enough for a feast.

Or try this... Imagine you're at an estate sale. There are lots of valuable things to look at—furniture, decorations, books... You pick up one of the books and leaf through it. It's a pretty valuable edition, so they want a good deal of money for it. You aren't really going to buy it, until you flip to a page where you find a lottery ticket. It's a winning lottery ticket—worth millions and millions. You can't take it—that would be stealing. But you can hide the ticket where you found it and buy the book. You empty your checking account, but you know it's worth it. Is it ethical? Not exactly. We could argue either way. In Jesus' day they argued about whether it was ethical to keep a treasure discovered in a field that had been purchased from someone else—But somehow the kingdom of God is like this too.

It doesn't always look fair—and it is worth everything we can give, because the treasure of God's grace poured out upon us, undeserving as we are, is better than any possession we might have to give up to receive it. Jesus' story of the merchant who finds the pearl of great price is similar. The pearl merchant discovers among the many common pearls a pearl so fine that he must sell everything he owns in order to buy it. And here we begin to see not only the great worth of the grace God offers us for our salvation, but also how far God has gone to make us children of God—because in giving Jesus, God's only son, God pays that great price, gives everything in order to draw us to himself again. And God draws all things to himself.

Jesus says it is as if God were a fisherman, casting a net into this world, and drawing each and every life, each person in his or her entirety, to the shore. No one escapes this dragnet, and the good is there along with the bad. What is good is kept, but what is bad—the sin that persists, the evil that plagues us, the things that we cling to that keep us from embracing God—these things are burned away as in the refiner's fire, so that what is left is useful and good and pure.

The kingdom of God...the place where God is king, where God's will is done, where people serve God and God receives honor... This kingdom appears unexpectedly and interrupts our plans, causes us to rethink our perspective, invites us to embrace the unfamiliar, uses what is common or considered undesirable, shelter and nurtures, provides and protects, appears in seemingly hidden places and costs everything. God's kingdom treasures what is good in us, and refines the rest—and what comes out of the refiner's fire is pure, and good, and holy, and pleasing to God.

Amen.