

In my eight grade science class, we began to unpack the mysteries of the universe. In a unit on astronomy, we studied the infinite wonder of stars, planets, and undiscovered galaxies. One day, my friend Jenna, a budding scientist, began to marvel at the insignificance of a single human. "If you really think about it," she told me, "each person is just one tiny human, in a town full of people, within a country full of more people, within an entire world, which exists inside a massive universe, within an infinite number of other universes."

"We are so insignificant," she commented.

I was horrified. As a 13-year old, in the beginnings of pondering my purpose and vocation, that last way that I wanted to feel was insignificant. Inconsequential. Small. Ordinary.

And yet, today's parable of the mustard seed asks us to ponder smallness. A mustard seed or yeast to leaven bread. What could be more insignificant and ordinary?

Of course, we know the fuller picture. A tiny mustard seed grows into a massive, wild weed, similar to the way that ivy can overtake a wall. Yeast rises to form a beautiful loaf of bread. And Leah, who Jacob views as insignificant and unwanted, eventually gives birth to six sons, whose descendants form the lineage of Israel. We know how the story turns out.

But what if we didn't know? What if we returned to the smallness of the mustard seed or the yeast, without knowing what they would become? What does Jesus see in this seemingly insignificant beginning?

Perhaps Jesus sees the possibility, the pregnancy, the infinite potential of this new emergence of life. In God's way, the "more" is present in the fabric, the beginnings, of the seed. Our full, messy, and intricate stories reside in our smallest moments.

At 10am, we will be baptizing Alfie Shields, inviting him into this potential of God's way. Alfie, like a mustard seed, already contains all that is needed to be a tree that gives shelter and protection to many. Now he just needs growth to become this tree that Jesus speaks about, in which birds come to make nests.

This image of birds making nests in trees reminds me of my recent visit to Tarra Bulga National Park. I was filled with awe at encountering these ancient, massive trees. These trees have an unconventional process of providing nesting places for birds. As the trunk grows, branches fall off, making space for the birds to nest. The tree's emptiness, or brokenness, becomes another creature's home. This metaphor reminds me that growing into potential is not always linear, not always about producing more. Our emptiness also allows us to become a resting place for others. We know that Alfie's life will contain fullness at times and emptiness or brokenness at others. And, we trust that this life is exactly what it needs to be, just like these trees that give safety to birds.

Planting a seed or baking bread are acts of creativity. Creativity is the coming into being through time of what did not exist before. Creativity begins in this fertile time before the seed sprouts or the dough begins to rise.

I like to think about life as a dance.

John O'Donohue uses the phrase, "an artist of the invisible." To me, this is the definition of a dancer and of any person who lives life in hope and creativity. Space and time, the materials of dance and of life, are invisible. Our materials don't seem to exist until we begin to use them. It is a delightful paradox. A mystery.

This creative engagement with mystery is sometimes referred to as process theology. Finding God in the "stuff" of life. The eating, talking, love-making, crying, singing, dancing. All matter is pregnant with layers of significance. The image of the mustard seed or the yeast return us to the pregnancy, preceding the significance. The space of creativity, the space of God. From there, we are invited to participate.

Our participation is an act of co-creation with God. We plant the seed in the soil. We combine the yeast with water, not too hot or cold, and cover the dough so that it can rise. When I begin to choreograph a dance, I bring my thoughts into the studio, often improvising with an image, gesture, or idea. Then, we trust. The bread rises on its own, the plant grows without our constant vigilance, and the dance or artwork slowly takes shape over time. We offer space for someone to share a story or our time to serve, and allow people to blossom. We have participated in, but not controlled, the incarnation of God. We are left with something tangible: "The Unexpected Holy."

My friend Vera touched on this “unexpected holy,” in a recent conversation. As I fretted over my anxiety for the future, my desire to do more, she said, “You are doing a lot even when you’re not doing much.” This is the mystery we live into as creative people of Christ. That much is at work through our smallest act of participation.

We must remember to retain this awe of mystery. One artist talks about the joy of mixing paint colors. Even though he knows that red and yellow will make orange, he chooses to be delighted each time in this transformation of hues. I wonder if we could approach life with this same sense of child-like awe, in the way that Alfie delights in the mysteries of the world around him.

When the poet Mary Oliver asks, “What is it you plan to do with this one wild and precious life?” we might turn this question back to God. What is it God plans to do with my life, with Alfie’s life? Rather than a challenge demanding an answer, Mary Oliver’s question becomes a gentle wondering. An invitation to participate in God’s unfolding.

There are things that we know. And things that we know that we know little about. And then, there is all that we don’t know that we don’t know. Think about a close friend or the partner that you share your life with. There was a time that you did not know of the existence of the person. This is potential.

When we look at a mustard seed, we can choose to revel in the potential of what it will become. When we baptize Alfie today, we affirm the potential of all that he will be. Then, we participate, nurture, and wait.

Trusting in our potential can be unnerving. Like the kingdom of God, or what we might simply call “God’s way,” the range of emotions that we can feel is infinite, unruly, unexpected, and sometimes unwanted. Unwanted like Leah.

And yet Jesus asks us to embrace this unruly infinity, holding it with the tenderness with which we would cradle something as small as a mustard seed, or a child as young and precious as Alfie.

My eight-grade friend may have been correct. We are small, in comparison to all that exists in our world. But we are not insignificant. In asking us to ponder a mustard seed,

yeast, or a pearl of great price, Jesus unites infinity with smallness, with emergence. May we hold our lives and hold one another in the same grace of infinite potential.