

As a new member of the working world, I have recently been giving a lot of thought to my daily commute. Each morning, as I'm sure many of you do, I fill up my travel mug with coffee, and set out onto the street of Saint Louis. I have been discovering that not all routes are equal – and I'm not just talking about time and distance. If I take Lindell to Skinker, there is always a woman holding a sign asking for money. No matter how many people stop, she always seems to be there. If I take Delmar instead to get to 170, the view is even more challenging. Check-cashing storefronts and the occasional person in a hospital gown greet me as I pass on through. Olive and Page provide similar scenes: shuttered Chinese restaurants, run-down businesses, folks with shopping carts. The only route that seems to allow me to avoid all of this, is if I take Forest Park Parkway to 170S, to 64W to 270N. It is not the most direct way here, but it is the least troubling for my mind and heart on many days, as I pass above the ugliness I might otherwise drive through.

This distant, removed perspective seems to me to be the type which Ezekiel describes in his vision – the vision from a cedar tree, far away on the top of a “high and lofty mountain.” This birds-eye view of the world described by Ezekiel reminds me of the Bette Midler song that goes, ‘from a distance, the land is cool and green’ – you know that one?

Well, from a distance, most of the earth would look peaceful; let's call it the ‘treetop effect.’ In the 1970s, the New York City government tried to take

advantage of the treetop effect by pasting gigantic stickers over the windows of the abandoned buildings which lined the Cross-Bronx Expressway. These stickers were of peaceful household scenes, like potted plants and cats curled up in windows. The decals hid the reality of poverty which lay beneath, as motorists passed by on their way from Connecticut to Manhattan.

And so, while Ezekiel's lofty cedar is somewhat awe-inspiring, I am grateful for Jesus' choice of plant on this day. The mustard plant is a much more humble plant, choosing to grow in ditches and abandoned fields. Its beautiful, bright-yellow flowers create shade for all manner of tiny animals. Mustard seeds can be used not only for food, but also as medicine to treat fevers, aches, and infections. Some might say that the mustard plant is more of a weed than anything, because it grows best when left wild.

Rather than the noble cedar, I choose this humble, nourishing mustard plant to be our teacher today, just as Jesus did, because of how it speaks into our daily struggle with the world around us. Preaching to a crowd of poor people about a kingdom they have never seen before – a kingdom ruled by love and justice – Jesus describes this kingdom in a truthful way that can be understood. Rather than painting a glitzy picture of success and prosperity, Jesus begins with an empty field and a tiny seed. “You see this soil here, where nothing is growing?” he says. “You see this tiny seed?” These people were farmers; they knew the promise of a seed, the risk and potential of a bare field. When these poor

farmers looked at a barren field, they could see instead green shoots, a table full of food, children that didn't go to bed hungry. "This is what the kingdom of God is like," says Jesus. "Stand next to me, and let's see this place together."

It gets a little harder, though, to step inside Jesus' imagination when we are dealing not with empty fields and mustard seeds, but instead with the more difficult realities of daily life. It is these human realities beyond which Jesus attempts to lead our imaginations; but we often have a hard time seeing past what is in front of us. Let me give you an example from one of my favorite saints of the church, Oscar Romero, former bishop of El Salvador.

In the imagination of Oscar Romero, the people of El Salvador had no place. The sweaty faces, the dirty hands, they all blurred into one indistinct mass. This needy mob was beneath Romero's attention in his life as a priest. He did not visit their homes; he did not see their empty tables. Romero stayed put in his priestly refuge, his equivalent of the treetop view, I suppose. The indigenous people of El Salvador remained distant and blurred.

As Romero said mass and baptized the children of wealthy Spanish landowners, the cries of hungry and poor Salvadorans grew louder; the grief of the families of those abducted by the corrupt government grew stronger; and finally, the Spirit of God broke in upon Romero in the form of kidnappers, who dropped Romero in the midst of the slums of San Salvador. There, Romero

witnessed hungry children up close. He met the families of those who had been abducted. The faces of this previously blurry group of people came into sharp relief.

Down on the ground, more on the level of the mustard seeds and abandoned fields, we might say, Romero's heart opened, and his imagination changed. Stepping into the imagination of Jesus Christ, Romero saw not only suffering in the slums, but also the promise of the Kingdom of God. Through Christ's imagination, Romero believed that there would be justice and dignity for every child of God. In the people of El Salvador, Romero began to see the very body of Christ. It was the power of that vision, God's vision, which drew Romero forward in his quest for that Kingdom, seeking food, education, healthcare, and justice for his people.

What surprises me about the way Jesus teaches about this kingdom is how often he seeks to communicate his vision, rather than exactly how to get there. While Jesus does spend time on the basic rules and directions, like, "forgive seventy times seven times," he doesn't dwell on them; instead, he returns over and over again to describing the Kingdom itself, like an artist painting the same landscape from different perspectives: "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which grows into a plant;" "The Kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field;" "The Kingdom of God is like a net full of fish." It is as if, when confronted by a person who wants directions to New York, Jesus

would begin describing skyscrapers and Times Square rather than telling the traveler to head east on 70. Jesus knows that we must be able to see and to believe in where we are going.

This is the challenge of the Gospel today: to envision a shady mustard plant, in the same instant that we see the reality of the barren field. To see the C-average high school graduate who is not sure how to do his own laundry; to send him off to college knowing that he will grow into a capable young man. To evaluate one's own limited budget, and to see the casseroles and canned goods that will feed hungry people.

It is the distance between these two visions – our vision, and God's vision - that, rather than causing us to despair, shows us the real power of what God can accomplish. And so we are asked to do two things: to see our world up close, to see the barren field; and in that same moment, to step into the imagination of Jesus Christ in seeing the Kingdom of God flourish like a mustard seed. May we be drawn into God's vision, being filled with his power as we seek that Kingdom.

Amen.