

**Reflection on the Gospel-16th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 13:24-35)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Experienced gardeners or farmers or bakers might take issue with Jesus' choice of images for God's empire or kin-dom of the heavens. They may be singularly unimpressed by the methods of the farmer-gardener-God presented in today's gospel reading. An "enemy" planting weeds "all through the crop" is no surprise to readers familiar with the earlier part of this parable chapter, although the land-owner's decision to leave the weeds to endanger the wheat crop seems none too smart. Mustard, known for its propensity to grow wild and threaten the life of every other plant in the garden, makes for an equally strange kin-dom analogy. God's empire imaged as a baker woman taking yeast, a substance considered a corrupting influence in the first century Jewish world, and mixing it into twenty kilos of wheat flour, stretches the imagination in other directions.

These images cut across the readers' expectations quite dramatically. What might they be telling us about God's kin-dom of the skies? In the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, there is a movement from small to great that communicates something about the power of God to bring abundance of life from the most inauspicious beginnings. They do not seem to fit with the parable of the wheat and the weeds until we look a little more closely. The element of danger to the life of the whole is common to all three parables. Maybe Matthew's Jesus is telling us that God is a God of risk who does not intervene but allows the weeds and endangering herbs to "infect" God's field. Harvest season will be time enough to divide the wheat from the weeds, the life-giving from the infectious. In the meantime, the good seed must take hold. The good will finally outweigh the evil. That is small comfort, of course, to those who suffer at the hands of evildoers.

In the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, Jesus may be telling his hearers that their idea of infection or danger is different from his. At one level, he engages the more-than-human and talks about respect for the complexity of eco-systems. At another, he is talking about societal inclusion: the people that many consider unclean or sinful or demon-possessed are not to be displaced from God's field or God's table. On the contrary, they may be the very ones who season the life of the whole. Life is messy after all and God is in the mess. It is worth noting that the leaven parable offers one of the few occasions in the gospel where God is imaged as female. While we know that God is neither male nor female, most of us have been conditioned to use only male images for God. The parable of the woman kneading dough validates the potential of female experience to reflect the life and activity of God in our world.