

**Reflection on the Gospel-16th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 13:24-43)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Some time back, my great-nephew met with an unwelcome refusal from his father. His response: "Dad, I am not impressed with what I'm hearing!" Like young Izaak, I suspect that most experienced gardeners and farmers and bakers would have something similar to say at Jesus' choice of images for God's empire of the heavens. They would be particularly unimpressed, I expect, by the methods of the farmer-gardener God presented in today's gospel reading. Leaving 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 image. 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 expectations quite dramatically. What do they tell 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 insignificant beginnings. They don't 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, prepared to allow the weeds and endangering herbs and other dubious substances to "infect" God's field. Harvest-time will be time enough to divide the wheat from the weeds. In the meantime, the good seed must take hold.

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 very 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 are all aware 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.