

Goal: That the hearers would find their nest in the shade of God's Kingdom.

I am going to start off today by saying that this sermon is for the birds. It's for the birds, which in Jesus' terms means that it's for you. In the parable this morning, Jesus refers to you and me as "*the birds of the air,*" birds who have built our nests in the shade of the mustard seed plant.

Now, how many of you have actually seen a mustard seed? A few of us who lived in Nevada have seen mustard plants spring up in the desert, but still then, we probably haven't seen a mustard seed. If you're like me, you get your mustard from Costco, along with ketchup and relish in a variety pack. But today Jesus wants to focus on the seed.

A mustard seed is so tiny that it's barely visible to the naked eye. Here is one (*show seed*). If you squint really hard, you probably still can't see it. As far as seeds go, it's unimpressive. And it's to this tiny, unimpressive seed, that Jesus compares the church, the kingdom of God. Well, no wonder so many take little notice of the church. When what they see of it with their naked eye doesn't impress.

We are a mustard seed. The "*smallest of all the seeds on earth.*" ("***And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."*** (Mark 4: 30 – 32) That means that we shouldn't look for our small church of Saint Mark to make a big name for itself in the world. Most people in the world won't be impressed with Christ's church, God's kingdom of grace, at least not by how it looks to the naked eye.

But mustard seeds, as Jesus describes, grow to become "***larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.***" We see this growth in the Book of Acts; as Peter, John, Philip, Paul, and others were used by the Holy Spirit to grow the church. That tiny seed that began as a handful of disciples, so scared that they hid behind locked doors, grew into a large garden plant; with branches extending down into Ethiopia; another branch spreading north to Damascus and Antioch; another branch going west into Asia Minor, another to Greece, and another branch reaching all of the way to Rome. Centuries later, branches of this tiny mustard seed spread throughout Europe and Great Britain, and across the sea into

America and across another sea to Hawaii. And its branches are still growing out, spreading to Africa, the Philippines, Russia, Japan, and even into China.

Impressive? Not really, at least not to the naked eye. The world doesn't celebrate this growth like the next iPhone or like the expansion of an auto market. The growth of the mustard seed takes place quietly, through unimpressive means like in the pouring of water in the baptismal font, through simple words spoken by a humble man of God and by humble Christians, and through the silent eating and drinking at the Lord's altar. Even though the mustard seed plant is putting out its branches into all the world, the world isn't taking notice, rather it sees the church as having little significance.

But that's not why Jesus planted His church in the world. His church is, we can say, for the birds. The large branches provide shade so that the birds of the air can come and make their nests in that shade of the mustard seed plant. And all birds are welcome. But not all birds come. (***“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.” (Mark 4: 33 – 34)***) Some birds are too proud to come to the shade. *“What would my friends say?” “I’m fine on my own. I don’t need the mustard seed plant!”* Some birds are too busy to come to the shade of the mustard seed plant. *“My kids have baseball games this weekend.” “I only have one day to relax.”* Some birds do not come to the shade because they're afraid to come. *“What will the other birds on the branch say if I come with them in the shade?”* Jesus planted His mustard seed plant within the garden for all birds, even for those who are not here in the shade with us. There is no one who should feel unwelcome on the branch.

Consider the branches of the mustard seed plant like the branches of the cross. Jesus hung on the cross, extending out the branches of His arms to draw all sinners to Himself. He carried the sins of all, and so the branches of His cross are for all to come beneath its shade.

Under the shade of the cross you are kept safe from the wrath of God. Now, you and I deserve God's wrath. As birds of the air, we've dropped our messes pretty much everywhere. That's the reason we don't park our cars under trees or light posts or wherever birds perch, because they make a mess. In the same way, we've made a mess of our lives and the lives of others. We've been judgmental and selfish, hurting others and neglecting their needs. We hardly deserve a place in the shade. Actually, what we deserve is a place in the hot, burning wrath of God, forever in hell.

But Jesus invites you to come into the shade of His grace. That's why He planted the mustard seed plant. That's why He extended one of its branches here to Kaneohe and Windward Oahu. Jesus endured the hot, burning fire of God's wrath for you. That's why He can now offer you the shade under the branches of His loving arms. Here in the shade of the mustard seed plant is the refreshing, life-giving water of Baptism. Here in the shade is the Sacrament of His body and blood for you. Here is mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus doesn't care how much of a mess you've made of your life or the lives of others. Here He gives you a repentant heart. Here He embraces you and says, "*I forgive you.*" Whatever sins you have done with your hands; whatever hurtful words you have said with your mouth, you are welcome beneath the branches of the mustard seed plant. There's room for every sinner. In that way, the church is like a hospital for sinners. It's the place we come when we are hurting and in need of comfort and hope. It's a place of healing through Christ's forgiveness. God's house is where we refreshing shade in His grace. It's here that whatever guilt or anxieties about life are weighing you down you can find sanctuary under His cross.

But don't expect this place in the shade to be without sin. Your sin is forgiven, but it still clings doesn't it? You know what happens when you get birds together? Feathers and dander get everywhere and they can be extremely noisy. I'll never forget the problems I had with two parakeets. And for Christians resting on the same branch of the mustard plant, feelings can still be hurt because we birds have sharp beaks and talons. But because we live together under God's shade of grace, we forgive each other because God, in Christ, has forgiven each of us. And the Holy Spirit works in us, helping us to repent and live as God's people.

So, you who are birds of the air, who come here to the shade of the mustard seed plant. And here you make your nest. This shade provides refreshing forgiveness for you and all who gather here. This is your home. This is where you raise your family. This is where you and your little chicks grow in the love of the Lord. Yeah, it still gets hot out there in the burning sun of Monday through Saturday. Yeah, there's still other birds of prey trying to destroy you. But, here you can always come to nest for rest. Here you always receive forgiveness. Here is the branch of Jesus' mustard seed plant. This place is for the birds because it's for you. Amen.