

# A Place for “All the Birds of the Air”

## The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Mark 4:26-34    Ezekiel 17:22-24  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd Freeman  
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I love the parables of Jesus. They are remarkably insightful nuggets of wisdom undergirding **the very mission and ministry of Jesus, which is the ushering in of the realm and kin-dom of God in the here and now, and into the future. This realm reflects what the world would be like if the ways of God were truly expressed in how we lived life and structured society. It's a way of living and being in relationship with all of creation – thus a kin-dom – understood primarily through Jesus' teaching to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. This realm is a place of peace, equity, and justice, where everyone is treated with equal respect, dignity, compassion, hospitality, fairness, and full inclusion.**



No one parable, however, reveals all there is to know about the realm and kin-dom of God in our midst. So, we're fortunate that today's lectionary contains two of what are known as the collection of "seed" parables. These two, as we will see, are enhanced when looked at together. Both are intended to encourage the community of faith with confidence in the dawning and expansion of God's realm.

The first, often called **The Parable of the Seed That Grows Secretly**, which is found only in the Gospel of Mark, states someone scatters seed on the ground then goes about the ordinary routine of daily life, sleeping and rising each day. However, this person doesn't know how the seed sprouts and grows to maturity, producing grain ready for harvest.

We learn **our role in participating in the growth of the realm and kin-dom of God is to scatter seeds far and wide through our words and actions, which as a community of faith reflects our mission and ministry efforts inside and outside the church.** Like planting real seeds in a garden, however, even with all the nurture we can provide, we don't always know if and when the seed will germinate and grow. Biblical commentator Douglas Hare relates this dilemma to those of us who preach each Sunday. He writes:

The parable has brought comfort to many a preacher, who has faithfully planted the good news without seeing much in the way of results. In some cases, it takes years for the seed to germinate! The work of the Spirit is invisible. We must not assume that nothing is happening when no dramatic changes can be seen.

I learned this long ago in and through my work in youth ministry at my home church near Houston before I attended seminary. Yet, I find evidence of seeds that have grown through how many of those 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders from 30+ years ago continue to connect with me, having friended me on Facebook and social media. **It is most likely parents, though, who know best what it is to plant seeds in the hearts and minds of their children, not always knowing if those seeds will take root and grow.** So, hopefully you can find

encouragement and comfort in these words, as well. For each and every time we interact with another human being, we have the opportunity to plant seeds of love and kindness and compassion, even if that involves discipline or standing firm in what we believe is the right thing to do. An important question to reflect upon, then, is this: **What kind of seeds have you been planting lately, including within yourself? What kind of seeds have we, as a community of faith, been planting?**

This parable teaches us that it is foolish to think that we can build the realm and kingdom of God on earth, or within ourselves, by our own efforts alone. Although we must strive constantly to be effective signs of its presence, **its establishment and growth is accomplished by God, through unmerited grace.** That's why some of us progressive pastors in town, in our pursuit of social justice, make **the distinction in between social advocacy on its own, and approaching this work in the context of ministry, where the motivation, empowerment, and perseverance comes from God's Presence in and through our work.** That does not mean, however, that the work of those agencies and organizations isn't a form of ministry in and of itself. I most definitely think it is. It's primarily more about how one approaches one's work efforts, regardless of one's profession.

This leads into our second parable, a more familiar one known as **The Parable of the Mustard Seed.** This very tiny seed is not much larger than the head of a pin. Yet, when it matures, it becomes a very large bush. It is large enough, in fact, that birds can nest in its branches. This parable emphasizes the contrast between its tiny beginning and its great conclusion. It shows us how **great things can come from small, even unpromising beginnings.** You may have noticed examples of this principle in your life, perhaps in your occupation or within a relationship. What may seem almost insignificant to you or me at first may grow into something strong and beautiful.

Look at the early church, for example. Jesus did not attract many big shots. A few fishermen; a tax man; some women; beggars, political zealots, restored lepers, and former demoniacs. This was the front-line of the movement that became a new world religion. Judged by the standards of the world – with its emphasis on the quantity of power, money, and people – Jesus' early ministry has to be regarded as a failure, especially since he, as the founder and leader, suffered a shameful death. **What could be less promising for the beginnings of Christianity?** And in the time when Mark wrote his gospel, some 30+ years after Jesus' death, the early church was being ostracized and persecuted. That is why **the message of the mustard seed parable is meant to be one of reassurance.**

But here's something to think about. **Is Jesus really referring only to the growth and spread of Christianity in this and other parables?** While I used to believe so, I no longer do. After all, Jesus was a Jew and there was no such thing as Christianity when he first told these parables. That doesn't mean we can't find meaning in them as it pertains to the growth of Christianity, but I don't believe they were originally that exclusive. After all, Jesus' wasn't referring to the church or even organized religion, but the "kingdom of God," to use its scriptural language. So, this isn't necessarily restricted to Christianity but pertains to the entire human family. It becomes an entire way of life and being in relationship, granted, **with the ways of Jesus as our guide and model, as opposed to what we refer to as "the ways of the world."** In Jesus' day that particularly meant **the ways of Caesar.** In other words, **the kingdom of men, not of God. So, yes, the realm and kingdom of God can include people from other faith traditions, not just Christianity – even though some would consider this heretical for saying so from a Christian pulpit.**

Since this parable is one about growth, biblical scholars are convinced that Jesus was well aware of the ancient images used to describe Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. The key to understanding why Jesus compared the realm

and kin-dom of God to a mustard seed lies in how people **compared the kingdom of Israel to a mighty cedar tree**, like we heard in this morning's Old Testament reading from **Ezekiel 17**. Ezekiel tells us how God is going to take a sprig from the very top of a mighty cedar tree and plant it on a high and lofty mountain, a reference to Jerusalem. Of this mighty cedar, Ezekiel writes, "Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." I'm sure that you noticed that Jesus used a nearly identical phrase in his parable of the mustard seed.

**This phrase, "all the birds of the air," was a well-understood figure of speech in the ancient world of the Bible.** As mentioned, it was **a phrase used by Ezekiel to describe God's intention for the nation of Israel to be open and inclusive of those from other nations.** That had not yet come to fruition by Jesus' time, however. And we appear to be even further from that reality today. Picking up on this, **Jesus used this same phrase to talk about God's intention for the inclusive nature of the entire realm and kin-dom of God – that it is accessible to all peoples and nations of the world.**

This notion would have been a horribly disturbing thought to those ancient Jews who pictured *themselves* as the *only* ones included as the people of God. This is a horribly disturbing thought today to those Christians who fancy *themselves* as the *only* ones included as the people of God. Yes, it's a sad fact, **too many folks consider themselves to be the only ones allowed to make their nests in the branches of the realm and kin-dom of God.** And we wonder why so many people today are deciding to simply turn their back on the church – not on God, but on organized religion and its exclusionary ways. Needless to say, if we can just get the message out, perhaps many of these folks could find a welcoming and hospitable home here at College Hill, as you have.

**It was in the midst of this exclusionary attitude that Jesus talks about God's realm as being amongst the common and ordinary (like a mustard bush that grows to only about 10' tall and grew wild throughout the countryside, almost like a weed), not just amongst the high and mighty (like the cedar tree which grew to 100' and was found exclusively in Lebanon). That comparison is called parody and Jesus used it to poke fun and even criticize.**

I wish this parable had been the one that guided our Attorney General of the United States this past week, instead of the passage he irresponsibly took out of context from Romans 13 about faithfully following the law of the land, which he stated was ordained by God, in order to justify this administration's zero-tolerance policy which is currently forcing the separation of children from their parents at the border. If nothing else, I wish he had looked further down in that same chapter to read, "'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

In this regard, **our country, as we have seen by numerous other events, such as those which spurned the Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movements, is still far from being that place where "all the birds of the air" can find a place to build their nest in its branches and find safety and security in its shade.**

**Yet, our hope remains in God and God's grace,** that in and through our actions and attitudes, guided by God's Spirit, we will continue to move and grow ever closer to that vision of living fully into the realm and kin-dom of God.

**Let us continue to plant those seeds!**

Amen.