

Mark 4:30-32

I suppose we could say that today's sermon is for the birds. In other words, it's for you because in our text, Jesus refers to you as "*birds of the air;*" birds who have built your nests in the shade of the mustard seed plant.

I don't know how many of you actually have mustard seeds growing out in your garden. I get my mustard from the grocery store, and I imagine you do as well. But we are probably familiar with the seed. It's so tiny that it's barely visible to the naked eye. Very unimpressive as seeds go. To this tiny, unimpressive seed, Jesus compares the church, the kingdom of God. Well, no wonder so many take little notice of the church. What they see of it with their naked eye does not impress them. We're a mustard seed. The "*smallest of all the seeds on earth.*"

Do not, therefore, look for the church to make a name for itself in the world. Do not look for great things to be said of this kingdom of grace. Do not be prepared to be impressed with the church, at least not by how it looks to the naked eye.

Now mustard seeds, as Jesus points out, grow to become "*larger than all the garden plants.*" 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 which began as a handful of disciples--scared disciples at that, behind locked doors--grew into a large garden plant; one of its branches extending down into Ethiopia; another branch spreading north to Damascus and Antioch; another branch going west into Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. Later on, branches of this tiny mustard seed spread through Europe into Germany and Great Britain, and across the sea into America. Its branches are still growing out, spreading into Africa, the Philippines, Russia, Japan, and even into China.

Impressive? Hardly. Not to the naked eye anyway, because this growth is unaccompanied by the laud and praise of the world. The growth of the mustard seed takes place quietly, unimpressively through the splashing of water in the baptismal font, through the simple words spoken by a humble man of God and by humble Christians, through the silent eating and drinking at the altar. Even though the mustard seed plant is putting out its branches into all the world, the world is not standing up and taking notice.

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.

All birds are welcome, but not all birds come. 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. 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 to be 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 - not you, not anyone - who should feel unwelcome on the branch.

Look at 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 and hide beneath its shade.

Under the shade of the cross you are kept safe from the wrath of God. We deserve that wrath, you and I. As birds of the air, we have dropped our messes pretty much everywhere. We have made a mess of our own life and the lives of others. We have been judgmental, intrusive. Our words have hurt others. Our actions have been selfish. We hardly deserve a place in the shade. Rather, we deserve a place in the hot, burning wrath of God both now, and forever in hell.

But Jesus bids you to come to the shade of His grace. That's why He planted the mustard seed plant. That's why He extended one of its branches here into Augusta and the surrounding area. He endured the hot, burning fire of God's wrath for you. This is 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 cool, refreshing, and life-giving water of Holy Baptism. Here in the shade is the Sacrament of His body and blood for you. Here is mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus does not care how much of a mess you have made of your life or the lives of others. Here He gives you a repentant heart. He embraces you in love 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 is room for every sinner.

Now do not expect this place in the shade to be without sin. Your sin is forgiven. Yet sin still clings to us. You know how it is when a group of birds come together. Feathers can fly. The noise can be deafening. Feelings can be hurt because we birds all have sharp beaks and talons. But we live together beneath the shade of the mustard seed plant in love for each other. We forgive each other because God, in Christ, has forgiven each one of us. And the Holy Spirit is at work in us. He helps us to cease our sinful ways and to live as God's people.

And so you who are birds of the air come here to the shade of the mustard seed plant. And here you make your nest. If this shade is refreshing for you; if the strong, but gentle, branch of Jesus' arm is the place you want to come, then you will build your nest here. This is your home. This is where you raise your family. This is where you and your little ones grow in the love of the Lord.

It gets hot out there in the burning sun Monday through Saturday. But here is your nest in the shade. Here you can always come for rest. You always receive forgiveness here. For this is the branch of Jesus' mustard seed plant. This place is for the birds. It's for you. Amen.