

Growing Greystone

Sermon 29 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 8, 2019

Matthew 13: 31 - 32

A few weeks ago, I traveled to my parents' house for the annual ritual of canning tomatoes. Before anybody in the house was awake, I was able to enjoy a warm cup of coffee on the back porch. Truth is, that back porch is one of my favorite places on earth. It is an altar in the world, to use Barbara Brown Taylor's poignant phrase. It's a quiet place surrounded by flowering plants, a prolific vegetable garden, potted herbs, and at least 5 bird feeders. I'm used to watching the birds come and go from the feeders, but this time I saw something new, a house wren hopping along the deck boards after landing rather close to my seat. It hopped along with some kind of worm dangling from its beak. It soon disappeared into the cucumber vine that had taken over the southeastern side of the deck railing. Before too long the same wren popped out of an adjacent potted plant with no worm in sight; then it took off in the same direction from which it came.

I watched with increasing curiosity as this little house wren repeated this behavior a few times. Before too long, my mom came outside and asked: "Have you seen the mamma wren yet? She built her nest in that potted plant over there, it's hidden by the cucumber vine. Her eggs have hatched and now she spends the day going to find food for her little baby wrens."

I was amazed that a bird would build a nest in such a place, so close to human activity. I suppose I shouldn't be so surprised though, birds nest in all kinds of places. We find them in our trees, in the eaves of our porches, in rural barns and in vacant, dilapidated downtown buildings.

Birds show up in unpredictable and surprising places.

They, like much of nature, are always present and rarely noticed except on some occasions when they crowd our beach towels, find their way down our chimneys, or fly into the glass panes of our fellowship hall windows.

Birds are rarely noticed at all... until all of a sudden, there they are.

They play the same kind of role in the Bible. I'd be willing to bet that birds would probably not make our top-ten list of most prominent characters in scripture but a closer look reveals a consistent and yet unassuming presence of birds from Genesis to Revelation.

In her book, *Consider the Birds*, author Debbie Blue writes, "God hovers over the face of the water in Genesis – the ancient rabbis suggest – like a bird. Birds gorge on the flesh of the defeated "beast" in Revelation. They are the currency of mercy – the birds of sacrifice. They bring bread to the prophets. They are food for the wanderers. Abraham has to shoo

them away from his offering, and a pigeon goes with Jesus on his first visit to the temple. God is a bird who carries the Israelites on her wings – a bird under whose feathers we will find refuge. Jesus compares himself to a hen. [And He tells us to ‘consider the birds’.”¹

In today’s reading from Matthew 13, Jesus is teaching in parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. First, he teaches the crowds and then he turns specifically to the disciples saying, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” (Mt. 13:16-17).

This is a common theme with Jesus, the idea that some will see and recognize the Kingdom that Jesus brings and some will not. There’s a mystery to it all, one that is only able to be captured by the peculiar genre of the parable, an ancient method of telling stories that employ common images to describe extraordinary realities. In this particular section of Matthew, Jesus uses nature images like seeds and soil, thorns and birds.

Jesus’ short parable about the mustard seed employs only fifty-some words but each line packs a serious punch and issues an invitation to question and re-think everything.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field.

Right off the bat, something is wrong here. The mustard seed had many common uses in the ancient world but being sown in a field is not one of them. There were strict gardening rules that prevented plants like the mustard plant to be sown near other crops. Practically speaking, the mustard plant, once rooted, was quite prolific and hard to control. Sort of like mint. This is not something you’d root in the ground next to your squash and tomatoes, it would grow recklessly and freely, taking up space and crowding out the other crops. If it was sown in a wheat field, it might be confused with the wheat itself and then mistakenly harvested as such. The mustard seed, if sown amongst a field would interrupt and disturb the order with wild and surprising growth.

Though the mustard plant was a bit unruly, it had its proper place in ancient society. Mustard was used as medicine for all kinds of maladies and conditions. It could be ground up and mixed with vinegar to apply to snake bites and scorpion stings. It could be chewed in the mouth to help with toothaches and stomach troubles. It was said to clear the senses and by the sneezing it caused, it was thought to clear the head as well.² For some first century commentators, there seems to be no illness the mustard seed cannot heal.

In Jesus’ parable, however, the seed is not sown for its medicinal properties or production value. Here, its purpose seems to be its growth.

¹ Debbie Blue. *Consider the Birds*.

² Pliny in Brandon Bernard Scott. *Hear Then the Parable*. p. 380.

It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

Here we go with those surprising birds again. The smallest of seeds grows into the greatest of all shrubs, so great that it becomes a tree. The shrub (which is the correct classification for the type of plant a mustard seed *should* produce) is transformed into a new kind of plant altogether. The shrub has become a tree. And not just any tree, a tree like the great Cedars of Lebanon in Ezekiel, those that stood tall and proud, reaching almost into the heavens. Or maybe like the tree in King Nebuchadnezzar's dream (from the book of Daniel) that symbolized power and provision for all who lived in his kingdom. These tree images employ the same language, insisting that all the birds of the air find shelter in their expansive branches. A student of the Old Testament, however, would know that those trees, the ones in Ezekiel and Daniel symbolize the political power of the kings of this world. Those kings are predictably similar to the grand cedars that should grow large and tall. But here, the mustard tree (which has no business even being called a *tree*) is able to offer another kind of unforeseen shelter for the birds.

Every time I read this parable I wish the author had told us what kinds of birds made nest in the mustard tree. Were they pigeons or ravens? Hummingbirds or crows? Doves or Swallows? Or maybe they were house wrens like the one that tucked it's nest behind the cucumber vine on my parents' back porch?

I suppose it doesn't matter so much what kind of birds were welcomed into the branches because that isn't really the point, is it?

The kingdom of heaven is like the small seed that by conventional wisdom (and ancient farming practices) never should have been sown in the first place. But by God's grace, it was.

As it grew – as mustard seeds are known to do – it grew wildly and without concern for the ways it would transform the field into which it was sown. Surely, that plot of land would never look the same again.

But what about those birds?

In the stories of the Bible, birds typically represent two things: (1) the Spirit of God. In Genesis the Spirit hovers over the chaos (like a bird, the rabbis say). At Baptism, the Spirit descends from heaven, like a dove. These are just a couple of examples. But sometimes the birds represent different groups of people. When they show up in phrases like we find in this parable, "the birds of the air" (implying all of them), the biblical implication is that even the Gentiles, even those who are undesirable and undervalued, even those who didn't traditionally belong, they too are invited to rest and nest in the cover of branches.

In fact, none of the elements of this parable traditionally belong. The birds shouldn't be nesting in a mustard tree. The mustard tree should really be more of a shrub. And the seed probably shouldn't have been sown in the field of a farmer... but it was.

And so, it is with the kingdom of heaven. A small seed is sown and somehow, somehow, it grows. And when it grows, it transforms into a new creation. Maybe it isn't what it set out to be, but what it becomes is a shelter for all the birds of the air.

35 years ago, 93 people signed the charter to form Greystone Baptist Church all because of a seed that was planted years prior. The seed for something new and not-yet-fully formed. Over time the seed, which was the mission of First Baptist, grew and transformed from First Baptist's mission to an independent church. It was unlike the other Baptist churches of its day. This one would empower men and women to do ministry equally and together. It would avoid the controversies of 1980s fundamentalism and forge a new path, where every member was a minister.

Before long the birds of the air – at least those in Northwest Raleigh – were finding their way to the corner of Lead Mine and Sawmill Roads, and they were building nests in the branches of God's kingdom taking root right here on this corner. Before long, Greystone was growing. It was growing because it offered something different and unique. It was being transformed into a new creation... Something relevant and life-giving. Perhaps something full of surprise and mystery, like the tiniest seed sown in the field.

That's how the kingdom often works, through the most unlikely means.

Maybe Greystone is growing again, even now. I wonder what kinds of kingdom seeds are being sown within the heart of this congregation, just waiting to take root and transform from seed to shrub to tree. I wonder what kinds of birds are flying around, looking in and searching for a place to nest and grow themselves.

I wonder if God is working within us collectively and individually planting tiny seeds of the kingdom...seeds that need to be nurtured and tended so that they might begin to transform us from the inside out, changing us and making us look like the kingdom trees that welcome all the birds of the air.

Maybe God is sowing within us seeds of home, seeds of refuge, seeds of welcome, seeds of kindness, seeds of faith ... maybe even seeds of new creation. We'd better be careful not to pull them up and throw them out like an unruly weed interrupting our orderly garden.

Just like that mama wren who built her home, tucked away in the potted plant behind the cucumber vine on my parents' back porch... I wonder what kind of surprise God has in store for us, if only we might allow ourselves to be transformed by the

unforeseen unconventional, and sometimes quite unruly presence of the holy spirit, coming to nest here, one new bird at a time.