

SERMON: For the Birds
TEXT: Mark 4:26-34

6-13-21

This is FOR THE BIRDS! My mom used to use this expression a lot, but it wasn't biblically-based; she was not quoting Jesus. Anything that she didn't like or didn't want to mess with, anything that was frustrating or unreasonably time-consuming would be harshly judged to be FOR THE BIRDS. Like sitting in a traffic jam, or waiting all day for the plumber to arrive, or being placed on hold when calling to dispute a charge on the phone bill. If it was FOR THE BIRDS, it was not worth her time and effort and frustration, and she'd rather be doing almost anything else.

When I think of birds, I tend to remember Alfred Hitchcock's classic horror movie, "The Birds." (Also not biblically based!) Just a few days ago, my friend posted a picture from a scene in the movie where the birds are swooping down around Tippi Hedren's blonde bouffant. My friend commented that she had a similar frightening experience while walking around her neighborhood one day last week.

Well, usually when we hear or remember the parable of the mustard seed, we don't think about the birds. Instead, we tend to think about the big things we can accomplish with just a tiny bit of faith. This comes from the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus tells his disciples, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20-21) Similarly, the Gospel of Luke records Jesus saying, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, *Be uprooted and planted in the sea*, and it would obey you." (Luke 17:6)

But here in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uses the mustard seed to teach about the kingdom of God. "It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

In this parable, it's not really about the mustard seed at all, nor the tree that it becomes. The seed is just a symbol, a metaphor to illustrate how small the kingdom is when it begins. But when it grows, "it becomes the greatest of all

shrubs... *so that* the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” The mustard seed is planted and becomes a tree – not for its own sake – but FOR THE BIRDS.

In the church, we don't think in “kingdom” terms very often. Of course, we know about shining the light of Christ, we understand that we are to share God's love and the Good News of salvation. And I preach frequently about loving our neighbors. But sowing or planting or even demonstrating the kingdom of God is perhaps a bit beyond what we can grasp. I mean, talking about the kingdom of God is like talking about the universe. It can be overwhelming, and I have a hard time getting my mind around something so vast.

Furthermore, I think the kingdom of God can seem so “other-worldly,” so incredibly foreign to us. In a scripture that we often hear during Advent, the prophet Isaiah described God's kingdom as a place or a time when “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

(Isaiah 11:6-10)

Wow. The world we live in these days is about as far from Isaiah’s vision as we’ve ever seen it.

Of course, Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was near, and that the disciples should pray for its coming. God’s kingdom would come when God’s will was being done “on earth as it is in heaven.”

I remember when my son was about four years old and we were teaching him the Lord’s Prayer. Like many children that age, he heard some of the words differently than what was actually said. My son prayed, “Thy kingdom come, *then I will be done.*” Best. Mistake. Ever. Dare I say that I like my kid’s version better than the original?!

Truer words were never spoken! As individual followers of Christ, and even more so as the Church – the Body of Christ – our work is not done until God's kingdom comes. In fact, the very purpose of the Church is to provide a vision of the kingdom, to demonstrate what the kingdom is like.

We are the sowers of the seed, the ones who wait for the seed to grow. The ones responsible for bringing in the harvest. We consider ourselves disciples. We are already God's people. We have nested in the shade of the mustard bush. Now it's up to us to provide that same opportunity for others.

We do not plant the mustard seed for ourselves. It's FOR THE BIRDS.

I sometimes wonder about the churches that are growing while most mainline churches are struggling to survive. What do they have that we don't have? Is it the entertainment, the music and lights and a big screen to watch? Or is it the fact that people can come and go rather anonymously, and avoid any responsibility to serve the church or to work for God's kingdom?

One Bible scholar wrote, “The mustard plant, though a very big shrub, is not a giant thing like the cedar in ... Ezekiel” on a high and lofty mountain. “Jesus chooses a common plant to describe how the kingdom could be working its way into something amazingly large from the tiniest whisper of a beginning. But he doesn’t use an amazingly large object to make the point. He uses the image of a bird nesting in the shade of a shrub. It is an image of expansive gentleness but not of overwhelming, unmissable glory. The kingdom of God is described not in grandiose terms but in terms of ordinary, quiet beauty as an inviting place to call home.” (Meda Stamper, www.workingpreacher.org, June 17, 2012)

In this church we can certainly claim “quiet beauty” and “a place to call home.” But it’s as if all the children in our family of faith have grown and gone, and they only come back on occasion to visit grandma and grandpa. Furthermore, we’re getting old. We just don’t have the energy anymore to run the programs that used to bring people in. It’s a big undertaking to plant seeds and tend a garden.

Nevertheless, our job is not to grow the church, but to grow God’s kingdom, to scatter the seeds of love and healing and peace. Our job is to imagine and become a place where people will know that they are welcomed and loved and

accepted by God; a place where they can nest safely and securely; a place where they feel at home. A place where they can find compassion after having been rejected elsewhere. We would all like to put more people in the pews on Sunday morning, of course. But that should not be our main purpose.

What would need to change here, in order for this church to be an example of the kingdom of God? I think providing a place for people - whether they come on Sunday morning or not - is something we're already doing. At Westminster, it's the SEMO Prom Mothers project and the Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts. At First Presbyterian, it's the Peace Park, the Joyful Noise Playground, the warming shelter for the homeless. We're planting tiny seeds that may not grow our church, but they will grow the kingdom of God.

May we remember, it's FOR THE BIRDS, to the glory of God!

AMEN.