

To Tell a Tale: The Mustard Seed

Memory Verse: 1 John 5:18

July 14th, 2024

Scripture Reading: 1 John 5:13-21

Today we are going to continue our way through Matthew 13 which is a unique passage of scripture that sports parable after parable all about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus opens this chapter with a story about a sower who goes out to sow his seed. That seed lands on various types of soil, and we learn that we ourselves are called to be sowers flinging the seeds of God's word anywhere and everywhere. We sow and God causes the growth. After that story, Jesus told a sort of sequel about seeds sown in a good field, but the field was also infested with seeds that produced weeds or darnel. The weeds grew up with the good wheat until the harvest. Then there was separation. The weeds were thrown out and burned, while the wheat was stored away and preserved for all eternity.

So the kingdom of heaven is sown everywhere and grows by the work of God. And this kingdom is interspersed, the holy and profane mingled together until that final day of the harvest, when separation will occur.

Well, today we are going to continue to add to our understanding of this mysterious kingdom of heaven by way of another parable and it's another parable about another seed. It's a much shorter parable, but we need to make sure that we read in conjunction with this parables about sowing and seeds that have come before. Jesus is staying on this train of thought for a reason and we don't want to jump off too early.

So let us take a look at the next installment of tales told here in Matthew chapter 13 keeping in mind these previous lessons from the story of the Sower and the story of the weeds.

READ Matt. 13:31-32

So we basically have four sentences here to consider. Jesus offered to his disciples a full explanation of the story about the sower, and he also offered a full explanation regarding his story about the weeds, but in this case, Jesus leaves us to our own devices here. There is no commentary given. It's as though he gave us a couple of practice parables that included the answer and now he leaves us to work out the rest on our own. It's a little like working with my father-in-law. Kevin is a great guy, it just don't think he has fully accepted that his beautiful daughter has married a boy from the suburbs. Kevin raises cattle, he works with farming machinery, he knows how to fix a tractor from parts that he finds laying around his property. He knows how to replace a gasket whether his fingers are numb from the cold or his skin is roasting in the sun. He knows a great deal about what he does, but I think he forgets that when I show up to lend a hand on a project, my main question is usually, "Is this one the gas pedal? What does this button do?" So as a city-dweller trying to be discipled in the ways of farm life, I don't want to appear like a full-fledged "cidiot", I want to at least appear like I'm tracking, like I know a thing or two, so I don't ask a lot of questions. I tend to think the disciples were much the same way. I imagine they heard Jesus tell one of his parables, and they nodded their heads in agreement, they made comments like, "Wow, powerful. Another good one Jesus." While their brains are screaming, "I don't get this! What does he mean? Why can't he just explain it clearly?"

We need to recall that even as these parables reveal certain truths about the kingdom of heaven, in another sense, they hide the truth and are not understood. And what is the difference between understanding and confusion? The ears to hear. We must have the ears to hear the ineffable truths that Jesus is communicating.

Well at first glance, if I was a disciple not willing to ask questions about this story about a mustard seed, I would nod my head in agreement and take it mean that this mysterious kingdom of God comes into this world as something small, unnoticed, something innocuous...like a mustard

seed. And then, overtime, as seeds do, the kingdom grows into something large, so large that it can provide a home for the birds of the air. And I might take that to mean that the kingdom is a shelter to those who seek shelter within it's sprawling branches. There is a lot to be said for such a moral to the story. All things that are large now, started of small at some point. Growth seems to be a healthy sign of vitality and it seems to makes sense that God's kingdom will come into this world with a small presence and, by God's power, it will continually grow into something that cannot be ignored. But this standard interpretation may be the result of a disciple who doesn't even know which pedal is which. And even though a certain interpretation might be well-known and popular, that does not necessarily make it correct. I think we need to look again at this story, and make sure we pay attention to the parables that preceded it.

Jesus begins with a mustard seed presumably because it was considered to be the smallest of all seeds. Anyone involved with gardening experiences miracles every season as seeds are planted, die under ground and spring to life shortly thereafter. We have applied scientific inquiry to the process and can describe what is happening to these seeds under the ground but we will never able to figure out why this process occurs in the first place. It is by design of our good God that a seed can turn into a great plant. That plant then can produce more seeds, according to it's kind, thereby creating more plants like itself. That plant can produce fruit to eat and a crop to sell. And let us not miss the greatest of all miracles, the greatest of all seeds, Jesus Christ himself, planted dead in the ground for three days, only to rise to life and produce the glorious fruit of salvation and the beginning of a living organism called the Church.

Now I want to stipulate an important differentiation here: The Church is the body of Christ, it is a living organism. It grows, it can be injured, it can adapt, it can persevere...It is an organism, but we treat it like and organization. An organization is something humans make up. We come up with an idea, rally some support for it, properly staff into it, have strategy meetings

about it, and track it's success or failure. Humans work together to create an organization. The church is not an organization, but we treat it like one. Think of these words: "Prominence, power, and position." Are these organizational words or the words of an organism? And how heavily do these words affect the innerworkings of the church today? How many pastors seek after prominence? How many people sitting on elder boards want power? How many underlings jockey for position or favor with the bishop?

The main point here is simply to say that an organization is completely in the control of the people who are part of that organization. An organism, a plant growing in the field, is absolutely not under humanity's control. Rather, as organisms ourselves, we have to opportunity to become a part of the body of Christ by way of faith, by way of repentance and baptism. And we join as part of the organism so that we might share in the life of the Church, but we do not join so as to obtain some sort of organizational prominence, power or position.

So the seed grows as an organism under the power and authority of God. And it produces a plant that is large enough to house the birds of the air. But, if Jesus was trying to impress us with the size of the resulting plant, why didn't he reference the mighty cedar tree that can tower over one hundred feet in the air. The mighty cedar that was used as paneling in the temple! Wouldn't that have impressed Jesus' listeners more than a mustard plant that can maybe reach a height of ten feet? Well, maybe Jesus is not trying to impress. Maybe his point is not about the towering presence of the kingdom in this world. After all, he himself is a humble king. So many churches are a towering presence. We have old mainline churches whose buildings literally tower over all others in the neighborhood. We have newer mega-churches that occupy multiple locations and advertise on billboards. I was talking to someone after church a few weeks ago, and they made the observation that in many of these types of churches, not all, but in many, if the influence of the Holy Spirit could be removed, the operations of that organization would keep on rolling. These

human operations do not run dependently in God's Spirit. They are more of an organization than an organism. In the moment, I agreed heartily with the comment, but later it haunted me a little. Could that be true of this church? Is that true of my ministry? Are we a self-sustaining human led organization or are we a deeply dependent moment by moment as an organism seeking God for our sustenance? Seeking God for our very life? It's not the easiest question to answer! Oh God, make us dependent on you!

Now to the birds. It seems obvious to see here a quaint and pleasant picture of birds chirping happily as they construct nests in the safety of the branches provided by this plant. Again, surely a cedar tree could hold even more birds and provide even safer lodging, but again, maybe we have missed the point.

Here we consider how Jesus has previously spoken of birds. Recall from the story of the Sower...some of the seeds fell upon the path and who came to snatch them up? Birds! In his explanation of this parables Jesus equates these birds to "the evil one who comes to carry off what was planted." So birds are not to be held in high esteem, at least not in the context of these stories. So if birds represent the evil one, what are we to make of a tree that provides shelter for them? Just as in Jesus' second parable about the weeds sown along with the good plants, we see here an intermingling of Satan's influence encroaching into the kingdom. When the seed cannot be plucked from the pathway, the pure plant that does grow is being defiled by the evil one who seems to often find hospitable lodging within the branches.

So I think we find in this parable, not so much a description of how the church impressively grows from small to large, but rather Jesus points to our desperate need to remain holy, to be on the lookout for the birds of the evil one who seek to nestle down into this tree of the kingdom. As Jesus has already made clear, there will be a separation that comes after this present

time of mingling. All evil and its influences will be done away with, and only what is holy will be preserved for all eternity. We must do away with these birds! We must remain pure!

This might be a mundane illustration, but recently my wife came home with a new pack of white t-shirts for me. I wear them pretty much every day under my long-sleeved shirts, and after a few loads of laundry, as I was folding clothes, I was struck by how my previous pack of white t-shirts was really no longer white at all. They looked fine on their own, but when I compared an older t-shirt, to one from the new pack, it was clear I was looking at two different colors. Bright white and off-off brownish white. And then I wondered, how long does it take a shirt to go from bright white to brownish white? How long before impurities and stains and wear and tear take a toll on a piece of clothing? And how blind am I to the difference? I don't even notice how stained I am until I behold purity.

Well, there is good news. The kingdom of heaven is not like a t-shirt that falls victim constant use and eventually wears out. Rather, the kingdom is like a small mustard that is planted and grows. The kingdom is an organism that can be continually renewed, continually regenerated, continually restored. Birds will come and go, some will stay longer than others, but this organism is not a result of human effort or organization. It grows at the behest of God himself and we are graciously allowed to become a part of it. Isn't that good news?

So what do you do about these birds? Why is the evil one able to nest in the midst of God's kingdom here and now? I don't know the full answer, but I would say that life in this world, relationships in this world, ministry in this world is messy. It's hard, because all of these things; life, relationships, and ministry, involve people and people are not perfect. We have our own birds that we are sheltering, our own birds that we are feeding in our own lives.

So here are some things we can do: Number one, pray! Pray for God's will to be done, that the purity of his kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. Pray for the leaders of your

church that they would remain true to God's word and combat sin in their own lives. As your pastor, I need those prayers! Pray for healthy growth in his church, because it is something we cannot conjure up ourselves.

Second, be a bird watcher; take stock. Take a look around your own life. What birds are nesting in your branches? What do we allow to remain that is contrary to the purposes of God in our life? Being a bird watcher means we are staying on guard against the evil one just as John recommended to today's scripture reading. Maybe you are dealing with a giant albatross that continually weighs you down. Something you just can't seem to shoo away. A mistake that hovers over you or a sin you seem to revisit over and over again. Come, once again to the Lord, and find grace. Be purified in the blood of the Lamb and be free of the birds that befoul you. Invite the Holy Spirit into those dark corners of your heart so we can do his great work of exorcising the demons that dwell there. Come to the Lord in repentance and be free!

Third, rejoice! Know that the end is near. Cleansing is coming. The separation of the harvest is coming. Jesus reigns on his throne now and for always. The fullness of his kingdom is not a matter of if, but a matter of when. And when he returns the birds will be scattered. Hallelujah!

That it! That's all we can do. It's not a lot, but it's enough. Pray, be a bird watcher and rejoice! In this we will see the kingdom as the organism that it is, our bright whiteness will return and we will find ourselves in the beautiful place of being desperately dependent upon God for growth. Amen.