

## Sermon preached by Archbishop Melissa M. Skelton for the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Philippines

### MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 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." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

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One of the tasks that comes with living in a place that has a yard with things that grow in it is that you have to pull a lot of weeds if you want it to look the least bit orderly. If you're me, you pull a lot of weeds every day because, of course, they are there every day. And if you don't pull them up every day, it isn't long before what was an insignificant little slip of a weed has turned into something that towers over all the other plants or spreads way beyond its singular self.

And, of course, this is why you and I might be surprised when we hear about the kingdom of heaven being compared to some of the things that Jesus mentions in our Gospel from Matthew for today. For the mustard bush that Matthew mentions was just a kind of weed, a kind of invasive plant that takes over what we might think of is the good stuff—the carefully cultivated plants we want to have in our gardens. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus tells us, is like a tiny mustard seed that turns into a gangly, raggedy bush, a gangly, raggedy bush that may not look like much, but once going, is hard to stop; a gangly, raggedy bush that can even shelter life in a way that would only expect from strong, noble trees.

So first a little bit about parables:

About parables one Biblical scholar said this (and here I'm paraphrasing): a parable is an image from nature or everyday life that paints a vivid picture for us about God and, at the same time, disrupts our certainty about who God is and what God does. Parables, then, make us think in new ways about who God is and how God shows up in the world.

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the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Maybe the first question to ask about this parable is this: “Who is the “someone” is who plants the mustard seed in his field?” Most commentators believe that the “someone” is likely to be God. And so a way to think about this parable is that it describes a very active God, a God who roams around in the his fields, all the fields of the world, planting tiny seeds, seeds that we don’t notice or value, seeds that are so small that most would believe that nothing promising can come from them.

But, of course, in this parable, these same tiny seeds are full of power to germinate and to grow and to spread just like the weeds in my garden. These seeds can grow so fast and can spread so quickly, in fact, that before long, they have taken over and have grown so large that even birds can build nests in them.

Just so you know, Matthew’s listeners would likely have been shocked to hear Jesus talking about birds building nests in mustard bushes. This is because Matthew’s audience would have been familiar with a number of Scriptural passages that compared important nations, even Israel herself, to towering cedars that were said to have the stability and strength to support the lives of the birds of the air, meaning the lives of the people themselves. To Matthew’s audience, then, mustard bushes would not have had the strength to shelter nests of any kind.

But this is what the kingdom of heaven is all about, Jesus says. The kingdom of heaven is not found or experienced in the safety and stability of tall cedars or, for that matter, in the sturdy narra tree. No, the kingdom of heaven is found in the raggedy, quick, and vigorous spread of a kind network of roots and small flexible branches that sway in the breeze. Sometimes not very beautiful to others, the kingdom of heaven has both a reach and a staying power that most of us associate not with slow-growing trees but with weeds.

And so what might this parable be saying to you and to me in our lives today—lives that at this time are upset and uncertain—upset about the pandemic and its threat to health and livelihood, upset about the grief at what we have lost in not being able to be together physically, upset as we think about family and friends that we care about in other parts of the Philippines and in other parts of the world that may be at even greater risk than we are, and upset in the midst of all the uncertainty about how long all of this will last and what the lasting effects will be on us, on those we love, and on the churches that are so important to us.

In the midst of all this upset and uncertainty we yearn for the strength of the cedar tree, the sturdiness of the narra tree. We yearn for a government or an institution or a church that will make things all right through its strength and stability. We yearn for something whose large arms, whose strong branches, will shelter our nests from the things that frighten and threaten us.

But you and I know that as much as we wish that our institutions could give us these things, they often cannot. They, in fact, have themselves been laid low by something else that is both tiny and that spreads like a weed—the virus itself.

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So if the tall, noble or sturdy trees are not the source of sheltering life for us, what is?

Here's what I think: The things that will sustain our lives right now are the small, sometimes invisible connections and acts of love and safety that, with God's help, we have been showing to one another at this time.

The things that will sustain our lives right now are the grassroots movements related to race and economics and health.

The things that will sustain our lives right now are the same grassroots actions related to protecting our beloved environment, something that EDNP is known for.

And what I am so proud of right now is the Church that we all love is right there in places across the world helping the seeds of love and safety, the seeds of justice, the seeds of environmental care be planted, take root and spread.

Where have you had to turn away from expecting the tall, strong trees of our institutions to shelter you and those you love? Where in your field have you instead experienced the planting of small seeds that have taken root and spread in a way that sustains you and those you love?

We, understandably, talk so much these days about that small, invisible virus that we would do anything to protect ourselves from, we would do anything to keep from spreading. Well, these small seeds of love and safety, these small seeds of justice-making, these small seeds of environmental care that our parable may be talking about are the things that God wants us to pass on and wants to spread.

And so, don't hold back thinking that the loving, justice-seeking and caring actions you take aren't big enough. For your small, your almost invisible actions are God's way of creating the kingdom of heaven here and now. You are a part of creating God's kingdom of heaven here and now.