

“Bushes, Not Towers”
Matthew 13:31–32
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We live in a world that’s obsessed with making it big. We measure our worth by bank accounts, social media reach, or just how exhausted and busy we can look. It’s like we treat life as this endless “Do-It-Yourself” project where we have to build, manage, and strive every single day.

And honestly, we bring that same pressure into our faith. We expect God to show up only in the big, noisy, spectacular moments. So when we read Jesus’s Parable of the Mustard Seed, we assume it’s just a motivational story about how a little faith will eventually turn us into something huge.”

“Have hope! Even if your faith is as tiny as a mustard seed, look at what God can do. Great things come from small beginnings!”

It’s a nice thought. It fits on a greeting card. It makes us feel good.

The problem is, Jesus didn’t tell parables just to make people comfortable.

As New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine points out, Jesus was a first-century rabbi. He used parables to challenge people, to stir things up, and to turn our world upside down. If we walk away from a story of Jesus feeling completely comfortable, we’ve probably missed the point.¹

To hear this story the way his first listeners heard it, we have to look at what they *expected* him to say.

When ancient people thought about divine power and great nations, they didn’t picture garden plants. They thought of the Cedars of Lebanon. The prophets Ezekiel (Ezek. 31) and Daniel (Dan. 4:1-27) used those massive, towering cedars to describe mighty empires—big, impressive, and unstoppable.

¹ See Amy-Jill Levine’s *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. HarperOne, 2014.

So, when Jesus stands before the crowd and says, "*The Kingdom of Heaven is like...*"—everyone is waiting for him to name a Cedar. A giant Oak. Something grand.

Instead, Jesus says: "**A mustard seed.**"

Think about how surprising that was! A mustard plant isn't a noble, majestic tree. In the ancient world, it was basically a **weed**. Wild mustard spreads fast. It takes over. It pops up where you don't expect it and insists on taking up space right in your own yard.

By picking a simple mustard bush, Jesus completely flips our idea of power: **The Kingdom of God doesn't look like a giant, exclusive empire.** It looks like a wild, ordinary bush spreading across the garden.

In her *Sunday Musings* today,² a weekly newsletter, author and historian Diana Butler Bass shared a recent three-week trip across Ireland with her husband. They spent their days walking quiet lanes and old roads—wandering past sheep and goats, visiting worn churches and ancient holy wells, listening to medieval chant and traditional Irish songs, and savoring strong whiskey and dark Guinness.

The only gold they saw was in an archaeology museum—mostly Bronze Age *lunulae*, the flat, crescent-shaped necklaces of antiquity. And while that ancient gold was beautiful, Bass realized it was no more sacred than the humble, ordinary things of daily life.

As a child, Bass imagined the Kingdom of God like a regal palace—adorned with gold, glowing with jewels, and guarded by knightly angels. An opulent realm of prestige, power, and possession.

But that is not how Jesus described it, she said.

No gilt-clad throne rooms. No grand displays to intimidate wide-eyed peasants. No warrior guards. No gold. No trappings of empire at all.

Instead, the Kingdom of God is like the simple, everyday sights she encountered across Ireland:

² Diana Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings*, in the *The Cottage*, July 26, 2026

- The Kingdom of God is like flower boxes blooming outside a pub.
- The Kingdom of God is like a seagull resting on a rooftop.
- The Kingdom of God is like daisies pushing through the rocks.
- The Kingdom of God is like a hidden doorway, rowan berries in autumn, or a stone cottage along a quiet road.

God is not tucked away in palaces of gold. God is in the ordinary. The Kingdom is what we pass every single day—and the sacred is already all around us.

Look at how the parable ends. Jesus says the plant grows large enough that *"the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*

In her commentary on the Parable of the Mustard, Levine says, "The birds are exactly that, birds."³ They're not to be interpreted as representing Gentiles being admitted into God's kingdom or as a grand geopolitical empire. By saying *"a bird is just a bird,"* she insists that Jesus was describing everyday creatures looking for basic survival rather than laying down abstract dogmatic formulas.

But notice what that mustard bush actually offers: **shelter**.

A cold, imposing monument made of stone gives no rest to anyone. But a sprawling, messy, low-to-the-ground bush creates a sanctuary. It stretches out its branches to make room for whoever needs a place to land.

So here is the question for us today: Are we trying to grow towering cedars—lives that look impressive from a distance but offer little shelter to those who are hurting? Or are we willing to become the mustard bush?

Are we willing to let God's love take root and grow right where we are, so that others can look at our lives and say, "There is room for me here"?

The good news is that you don't have to build an empire. God is not waiting for you to become famous, successful, or perfect. God meets you in the ordinary moments of everyday life—in a meal shared with a neighbor, a listening ear, a word of encouragement, or an act of quiet kindness.

³ Levine, 180.

So plant the small seeds of love. Trust the quiet, steady work of God.

Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into a shrub." It may never rival the height of a cedar or an oak, but it is big enough for the birds to find shelter in its branches.

Isn't that a beautiful picture of the church? It's not about size, numbers, wealth, or power. It's about being a **community where all are welcomed, loved, and given a place to rest.** By God's grace, may we always be that kind of church. **Amen.**