

A Place for 'All the Birds of the Air'

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Mark 4:26-34 Ezekiel 17:22-24
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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August 2, 2009

The visual image that I am using for this morning's sermon on the Parable of the Mustard Seed is the remarkable sculpture sitting on our Communion Table. It's by local artist Virginia Harrison, entitled "Spirits-Shielding." I want to introduce her to you now, because Virginia, who has become a friend, is worshiping with us this morning.

When I saw this piece of art in a local gallery, it really "spoke" to me, reminding me immediately of Jesus' famous parable. So I bought it! But before I reflect on the image that this sculpture depicts, I first want to talk about something completely different: parody.

Parody: Something that is used to mock, spoof, mimic, comment on, or poke fun at an original work by means of humorous, absurd, satiric or ironic imitation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines parody as imitation "turned as to produce a ridiculous effect" (quoted in Hutcheon, 32). To get a better idea of how parody is used, let me provide a variety of examples from a wide range of different genres.

In music: In the 1800s, Gilbert & Sullivan parodied the style of classical composers like Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Handel when writing their comic operas.

In pop music: a guy named 'Weird Al' Yankovic has been writing hilarious parodies that mimic hits by Michael Jackson, Madonna, and lots of others, for over 30 years.

In film: In 1940, Charlie Chaplin parodied the life of none other than Adolf Hitler in his movie, *The Great Dictator*. Mel Brooks did the same in his 1968 movie, *The Producers*. The year 1974 saw some of the best-loved movie parodies. There were two more that very year by Mel Brooks, this time of old Hollywood Westerns with *Blazing Saddles*, and of old black and white horror films with *Young Frankenstein*. Also in 1974 came Monty Python's parody of the legend of King Arthur in the hilarious and very silly *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Five years later they parodied the life of Jesus with their satire *Life of Brian*. Perhaps my favorite movie parody, poling fun at disaster movies, was *Airplane!*

In TV: *The Daily Show with John Stewart*, or *The Colbert Report* parody news broadcasts and talk shows to satirize political and social trends and events.

In politics: actress and former cast member of 'Saturday Night Live', Tina Fey, did a scathingly funny parody of Sarah Palin in last year's presidential campaign.

In literature: Cervantes' 1605 masterpiece *Don Quixote*, is actually a parody of a much older work of romantic chivalry. Even Shakespeare used parody in parts of *Hamlet*. But parodies in literature go all the back to ancient times.

Well, you may be wondering why I am spending all this time explaining the use of parody? Because there is evidence that Jesus himself used parody of the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) in the telling of his parable of the Mustard Seed. For you



see, Jesus actually makes reference to a poem in the Book of Ezekiel and, according to a definition of parody, turned it as to produce a ridiculous effect. Before we look at how Jesus did that, we first need to look at that Old Testament reading from Ezekiel 17.

Ezekiel tells us how God is going to take a sprig from the very top of a mighty cedar tree and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. This visual image of a cedar tree was used metaphorically by the prophet to refer to the nation of Israel. And of this mighty cedar, he writes, **“Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.”**

I’m sure that you noticed that Jesus used a nearly identical line in his parable of the mustard seed. In describing the kingdom of God, Jesus uses the metaphorical image of a very tiny mustard seed that grows into a great shrub **“so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”** As it turns out, this phrase is actually a figure of speech. I will return to its meaning in a moment, but now I want to expose Jesus’ use of parody.

The Ezekiel passage talks about the nation of Israel, comparing it to a cedar tree. Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, comparing it to a mustard plant.

In the ancient world of the Near Middle East, cedar trees grew naturally exclusively in Lebanon. Mustard plants, however, were actually considered to be a weed and were found throughout Israel. A cedar tree can grow to a height on 100 feet. A mustard plant grows to only 10 feet. The cedar tree was used as a symbol for power and might. A mustard plant, on the other hand, being neither grand nor glorious, is common and ordinary.

Here’s the difference in comparison using more common modern terms for us. Israel is like a mighty California Redwood. The kingdom of God is like the wild grass that grows in your yard.

What is so easily overlooked in the interpretation of this parable is that Jesus, by use of parody, is poking fun at the symbol Israel used for itself – the high and mighty tree. Ancient folks would have expected Jesus to use even a grander symbol than a cedar tree to describe the entire kingdom of God. Instead, Jesus compares it to a common weed. Why? And what can we learn from such an analogy? Let’s start by looking at common weeds.

Why do we describe certain plants as ‘weeds’ in the first place? Because they grow where they are not intentionally planted, where they are unwanted. A weed, then, is considered a pesky intrusion into an ordered garden, therefore something that we usually try to get rid of.

Jesus was describing the kingdom of God as something that grows from a very small beginning into something that can act like a pesky intrusion into the ordered garden of society.

Let us extend that to particular individuals or groups of people. **Who might our culture today describe as pesky intrusions into the ordered garden of our society?** Well, there are always the poor, the homeless, and the outcast. Here in Oklahoma, those pesky intruders are sometimes identified as those “not like the rest of us.” That often means those who speak out with prophetic voices against injustices in church and society. **And we are all too aware of this state’s current and continuing attacks (though they won’t admit it) toward the Hispanic community.**

So what is a weed? A weed it’s simply a plant or flower that’s a victim of prejudice. After all, God doesn’t use a negative connotation by calling something a weed – we do. To God it is just another part of God’s great diversity of creation.

So what does Jesus' parable, by use of parody, this say about the kingdom of God? Instead of searching for the kingdom of God by only staring up at the mighty and powerful (like the cedar tree), simply look around you at the common and ordinary (like the mustard plant) – that's where we most often find God's presence. The common and ordinary are also found in humble surroundings, and include those that others in society push to the fringes – those they don't consider socially acceptable, those they consider to be a weed. These folks, however, *are* included in the kingdom of God.

I must admit that I kind of like the kingdom of God being described by Jesus as a common pesky intrusion, rather than as the place for the high and mighty. That, my friends, is parody!

So let's return briefly now to that statement that is included in both the passage in Ezekiel and in the gospel of Mark. The phrase **"all the birds of the air,"** as I explained in this morning's Time With the Children, was a well-understood idiom, a figure of speech commonly used in that part of the ancient world. **It was figurative language that basically meant "all people," "todos."**

In other words, it was a phrase used by Ezekiel to describe God's intention for the nation of Israel to be open and inclusive. That has not yet come to fruition, however. So Jesus used this same phrase to talk about God's intention for the inclusive nature of the entire kingdom of God – it is accessible to all, to all peoples and nations of the world.

This notion would have been a disturbing and even disgusting thought to those ancient Jews who pictured *themselves* as the *only* ones included as the people of God. **This is a disturbing and even disgusting thought today to those Christians who picture themselves as the only ones included in the kingdom of God.**

Then and now, groups of people have fancied themselves as forever-chosen, forever-favored, forever-vested with authority to order the life of the people of God. Such an attitude had led many to try to determine who is in and who is out, who is to be accepted and who is to be rejected. It's as if they considered themselves to be the only ones allowed to make their nests in the branches of the kingdom of God. And we wonder why so many people are deciding to simply turn their back on the Church – but on God, but on organized religion. Needless to say, if we can just get the message out, perhaps many of these folks could find a welcoming home here at College Hill.

It was in the midst of this exclusive attitude that Jesus talks about God's kingdom as being common and ordinary, and inclusive of everybody. So let me close with a couple of questions.

- Are we, as College Hill, truly going to let "all the birds of the air" nest in *our* branches?
- Are we going to be a place that offers hospitality and protection, a place where *all* are welcome, and a place where the gifts of each person are affirmed?

If so, then let us continue to plant seeds of compassion, justice, hospitality, inclusiveness and love by ministering to all those who enter these doors and beyond. And when being inclusive isn't easy, and often it is not easy, then visualize this beautiful sculpture, reminding yourself of it's ability to allow all the birds of the air to make nests in the shade of its branches – God's branches.

Amen.