



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

**THE FOURTH  
SUNDAY AFTER  
PENTECOST**

**JUNE 16, 2024**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

The parable of the mustard seed demands a bit of knowledge about first century botany in Palestine. Why would Jesus compare the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed? How does a tiny seed speak to such a decisive notion as the Kingdom of God? Let's recall that the Kingdom of God is no earthly or cosmic location. It is neither heaven nor a place in the heavens. It is not West Virginia, which never was known as more than "almost heaven." It remains inaccessible by country roads, John Denver notwithstanding. Our journey to the Kingdom of God will end only when God truly reigns, when the will of God is perfectly reflected in human behavior. That is the goal. That is the destination. And it starts with a mustard seed.

Jesus' first century Jewish audience would have understood where Jesus was going with the mustard seed. In Palestine, the mustard seed was tiny, but grew into a large tree, even exceeding the height of a horse and rider. Moreover, the mustard tree had large branches. As Jesus noted, "the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."<sup>1</sup> So mustard trees typically were surrounded by clouds of birds.

In the Old Testament, great empires often were described as trees surrounded by flocks of birds. The birds represented the various nations that constituted the empire. That was Jesus' way of describing the Kingdom of God. Something very large. Something very inclusive.

The kingdom of everyone, everywhere. Everyone included. No one excluded. A kingdom where God's will was perfectly practiced and realized.

Hard to imagine, isn't it? A kingdom in which we love our neighbors, even our enemies. A kingdom in which we all respect the dignity of every human being. A kingdom where we strive for peace and justice for all. No exceptions, no qualifications, no conditions.

When we see the Church as an institution, we neglect what it really is. We are a family. We are the family of God. And like any family, as they say, we

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 4: 32 (NRSV).

cannot pick and choose our relatives. We may be distant to close relatives or close to distant relatives. But we are in relation with all of them.

Sadly, we often spend more time seeking to distinguish ourselves from others than seeing affinities that might connect us. In worst cases, we see ourselves as better than others in some way, disconnect from them, and judge them inferior and less worthy of our love – and God’s love. We build barriers that God never intended, and Jesus sought to tear down.

Look around. In a nation, not a Christian nation, but a nation founded on many Christian values, we have to have laws to condemn arbitrary and invidious discrimination as the sin it is. We assign ourselves and consign others to tribes that we treat differently, judging them more harshly and limiting their access to our privileges, power, and wealth.

Ironically, even our Episcopal Church, which embraces the teachings and example of Christ, has had to adopt canons prohibiting discrimination in its discernment, employment, hiring, licensing, ordination, calling, and deployment based on “race, color, ethnic origin, immigration status, national origin, sex, marital or family status (including pregnancy and child care plans), sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disabilities or age.”<sup>2</sup> It's discouraging. At times, it even seems hopeless. But is it?

We do have a ways to go, to be sure. But we will get there in spite of ourselves. Think of the mustard seed. It was, indeed, the tiniest of tiny things. But it grew into a tree. That growth does not take place overnight. It takes time. We have not yet realized the kingdom of God. But the key word is yet. Jesus knew that. And Jesus wanted his followers to know that. He wanted them and he wants us to be patient. The growth of the Kingdom will take time, whether seen as the expansion of the kingdom to all nations and cultures or the development of cultures where God’s will is done perfectly on Earth as it is in heaven,

Like the seed in the ground, like the growth of branches silly millimeter by silly millimeter, its growth and development often will be imperceptible. We live in the midst of it. We have no ability to stand outside history and envision and appreciate the growth that takes place over decades and centuries and millennia. But the mustard tree will grow and flourish and more birds will flock around it and reside in its branches and shades.

We can trust that God’s promise for the future will be fulfilled. We just need remember that it is, indeed, God’s creation and God’s vision and intentions

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<sup>2</sup> Title III, Canon 1, section 2. *Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*, 2022, pp. 94-95.

for it. And God will see it through. We just need to be patient. And not be discouraged.

And because it is in the final analysis God's undertaking, we should never deny our helplessness. But we should not lament it either. Again, the mustard seed. No farmer could make it grow. And in the first century, no one even would have understood how it grew from a tiny seed to a sturdy tree of many branches. They trusted it would grow if nurtured properly. But they no more created the seed than we can create God's kingdom. We are stewards, not creators. And that means we can investigate and experiment and examine and discover. We can rearrange and develop and build upon. But we cannot create.

We also can hinder and frustrate the development of the kingdom of God. Or we can hasten the kingdom through living as Christ would have us live when the kingdom ultimately is realized.

We can use our discoveries for good or evil:

- We can use fire to cook our food or clear our land. Or we can burn our crops and our homes.
- We can generate electricity with atomic energy or build bombs to obliterate our enemies.
- We can build airplanes to speed fresh Oregon salmon to Florida or fresh Gulf oysters to New York or we can use them to drop our atomic bombs.
- We can encourage a culture where everyone can contribute according to their capabilities, or we can erect barriers to education and employment that stifle human potential.
- We can promote the values we embrace as followers of Christ in our public life, or we can succumb to the temptations of wealth and the lust for power.
- We can forgive and seek to reconcile, or we can indulge our anger and resort to violence to resolve our conflicts.
- We can be grateful for the God-given blessing of life itself, or we can murmur about God's seeming indifference to our hardships.

God has set humanity and creation on a journey to God's kingdom that will reach its destination in spite of our imperfection and indifference, even our resistance and rebellion. The day will come when God's kingdom come, God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is inevitable. It's like our

lawns in Florida, the grass will grow no matter what, even in our concrete sidewalks and driveways and patios. We need just to be patient. We need never lose hope. We just must be prepared.

To borrow from William Barclay, our go-to Scottish theologian:

If we live in patience which cannot be defeated, in hope which cannot despair, and in preparation which ever sees life in the light of eternity, we shall, by the grace of God, be ready for his [kingdom] when it comes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, "Mark," *William Barclays Daily Bible Study Bible*, StudyLight.Org, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/mark-4.html> (accessed May 7, 2018).