

Good morning, church family,

I am going to do things a little differently today. I am not going to be doing this sermon off of an outline and talking through it, but will be reading this directly. This is going to feel awkward for me since I am not used to doing it this way, but I feel like I need to ensure that what I say is exactly how I was guided to write it, so I ask for your grace if it feels a bit wooden.

This morning, I would like to share with you my thoughts on a passage that we have no doubt heard many times before. A passage about the wee wittle mustard seed. Oh yes, that tiniest little seed that thought it could and did. According to Luke's account of this story, this seed was planted and grew into a large bush and was a place where the birds could perch. The NIV and NASB put it differently; they say it "grew

and became a tree, and the birds of the sky nested in its branches.” The tiniest of seeds can grow to be the largest of plants. It produces large branches that allow all kinds of birds to nest in it and seek out its shade and protection.

If you look at Ezek 17:23-24 and 31:7, It talks about how the righteous will grow to be the Cedars of Lebanon. How those rooted in God will have their roots dig down and find the abundant waters will make them grow strong. The passages also talk about how the righteous will be planted on a holy mountain, have their branches bear fruit, and support the birds who nest in it. Looking at the NT and the OT, we find that many places in the OT that answer questions about the NT. For example, when Jesus says that heaven is like a mustard seed thrown into a garden and grew into a tree, and its branches supported the birds, we

can look back to the OT and know where the parallelism is coming from. We can see the Scripture that the people understood Jesus to be referencing.

This was way back in time. They did not have the NT yet. That was still being developed as Jesus ministered. The NT was still decades away from being ink on parchment. When Jesus was speaking, he had to reach those he was speaking to. He couldn't tell them about some image they would need help understanding; they would not only miss the point due to the hidden nature that parables already have but also because the imagery that Jesus was using would not be familiar. These people would know of the Cedars of Lebanon. They would know their strength, beauty, and broad tops that provided ample amounts of shade both within and below. Their minds would take little

time to bring up that image. Today, if someone said heaven is like the forests of Colorado, it wouldn't take a second for our brains to pick out our favorite hiking or camping spot or even a place we had seen before, and thought was gorgeous.

If you look at the most common mustard plant in that region, you'll see that the most common, and thus the most likely mustard plant Jesus is talking about, is the *Brassica Nigra*, or black mustard. This was the heartiest of them, the one that the arid soil and crushing heat could not contain. There is just one problem. If you have your cell phone with you, go ahead and google a picture of *Brassica Nigra*. While you do that, I'll speak a little more about it. This plant was not seen as yielding a tasty crop that could be turned into a

spicy and vinegary condiment. It was seen as a violent, uncontrollable, pernicious weed.

A plant that, even if you pulled it up by its roots, would somehow still find a way to keep growing. I don't know about y'all, but I must have some mustard plants in my yard. I pull one, and 3 more grow. I try and try and try to get rid of them, but they will not relent. I have attempted to poison, burn, uproot, and even kill the entire soil with salt in some places, and yet they still manage to be the bane of my yard's existence. What is it about weeds that are so impossible to get control over? This is why mustard, when it was intentionally planted, was done far into the desert away from people so that their personal crops were not threatened, for this weed takes what it will and has no regrets for the ash it leaves behind. Sounds pretty rough,

right? Well, I place before you today the tenaciousness that the mustard seed had at killing anything in its path is why Jesus used it in his parable. Let me explain:

We now know that the mustard seed is the tiniest of all seeds, yet great things can come from it, both good and bad. We now know that the mustard plant was rarely considered to be a good thing. It took over gardens and fields, eliminated what was once there, and entrenched itself firmly in that soil. It was something that when it was discovered to have been planted, they watched it very intentionally and meticulously, under very careful circumstances so that if it started to spread, it would hopefully be something that would not affect anyone and could even possibly be contained due to how the growing was governed.

So, this does not sound very positive. That is because there is still more that needs to be explained on why Jesus would use it. Jesus is trying to convey to them that the kingdom of heaven is like a weed. People are not going to want it. They are going to try to starve it out. To eliminate the fields of it. They will carefully watch it to ensure it does not threaten their current way of living off the land. They will allow it to take root, but not in any place where it could change how people think about agriculture. Are you starting to see the picture coming into focus?

The people did not want Christianity to come in and disrupt the status quo. They were perfectly fine the way they were and did not want to change. They knew that this new religion started with one small man, a carpenter of no means. Conceived to a woman out of wedlock and born in

a barn. I don't know about your parents, but mine, somewhat frequently, would ask me if I was born in a barn. I can only assume that this question did not have the desired effect on Jesus that Mary would have hoped!

This religion, this bush, took over everything. People would try to smother it, kill it, tear it up by its roots, persecute it, and even banish it, yet it would not stop. This one man revolutionized the world. I am reminded of the idea of time travel. People often express concerns about traveling back in time and doing something monumentally mundane, even unintentionally, and then having it affect their present with enormous consequences. We frequently hear people talk about this, but how often do we recognize the profound impact of just one small, inadvertent act in the here and now on the future? Aside from Jesus, who would have known



that this seemingly insignificant person would radically transform the future and change the entire history of humanity. On the fundamental level, what did we measure time in? Years. What were years stated as? BC/AD. Before Christ and Anno Domini or Year of the Lord. Imagine if our faith were as small as this tiniest of seeds? Jesus said we could literally move mountains. We could do unlimited things if we could only have faith the size of this seed. We don't and can't. That is why we must ensure we are rooted into the fertile soil that Jesus provides.

Jesus planted the seeds into the fertile soil and watched his crop spread and grow uncontrollably. The religious leaders and those who had much to lose because of Jesus did everything they could to stop the spread of the weed that had infested their garden of power and control. This new

religion offered people a place of refuge, shelter, and a new way of living. These birds, aka Christians, were one minute in the protection of that bush, but the next, they could be knocked off their perch and forced to fly. Remember back when I said to look up a picture of black mustard? Remember how it did not look like a great large tree? Remember how the branches were tiny, thin, flimsy, and looked like they couldn't hold their breath, much less another living creature? Yeah, I noticed that too. Christians can be like that. Christians can be loving, supporting, embracing, providing, and sheltering one minute and then turn their back on you the next. Ask any gay person who has had to deal with evangelical fundamentalist Christians on a social rampage to “love” people by beating on them. Or the woman who had to make the sometimes impossible decision of whether to risk it all and carry the pregnancy to

term or choose to end that pregnancy to save her life, be that physical, mental, or social. One minute these "branches" are offering their everything to you, and the next minute you are the scum on the gum on the soles of their shoes. They ostracize, reject, and even directly persecute those people they once supported all in the guise of doing it out of love. Love the sinner hate the sin. A nice platitude to make people feel better about the things that they do TO others, not for them. As it is put in another saying, "there is no hate quite like Christian love."

The soil on which those plants are rooted, Jesus, never changes. That soil stays constant and consistent, offering a place for that seed to root, grow, and spread. It is the plant itself that sways with the winds of society and of theological beliefs. The birds are hungry for a place to feel safe,

supported, and like they can nest in the shelter it provides. But can they trust the branches to which they perch? Can they trust that the plant that may have hurt them in the past will not do that again? Can they trust YOUR branch? Is your branch solid and sturdy like the Cedars of Lebanon that Jesus calls them, or are they the weak and tiny black mustard weed people have unfortunately seen too often? When what you have in you is spreading to the communities you work, the places you visit, the people you know, are you spreading branches or twigs? Are you spreading love and support, or a theology that sounds good and pretty but lacks the Spirit's strength to back it up? Are you planted far from anyone so that no harm can come to either them or you, or are you in the middle of the garden destroying that which does not align with Scripture? Are you using your branch to fight for those silenced, or are you the reason they must

stay quiet? Are you looking at God's branches and seeing them capable of supporting all kinds of birds, or only the birds you want to see on that branch?

People think that when you talk about a weed overtaking a person's garden and livelihood, they automatically think negatively. We, as people hopefully offering branches, must fight against that. Sometimes, the world gets people out of trouble when God seemingly couldn't or wouldn't. Perhaps then associate the problems they have with God directly. They think this is great, but all they are doing is accepting more of what hurt them in the first place.

There is a story of a bird that I would like to share. It has one curse word that is said a couple of times, so I'll clean it up, but you'll know the word I am replacing, and you can say it in your head. There was this bird who thought he was

on a branch that would support him. The winds came, the temperatures dropped, and the branch was not rooted deep enough in the soil to support him any longer. The bird fell to the ground, got stuck to the frost, and couldn't move. The cold came, and he was freezing when a great large creature passed overhead and pooped all over him. The warmth of the poop made the bird feel better and like he was going to be okay. His excitement and relief caused him to begin to chirp and sing. This attracted the attention of a cat who came, saw him, took him out of the poop and ate him. The moral of this story is four-fold: 1. Sometimes, things you trusted and relied on will fail you, and you will feel betrayed. 2. Not everything that poops on you is your enemy. 3. Not everything that gets you out of the poop is your friend. And 4. Most importantly, when you are in deep poop, keep your mouth shut!

So, I leave you with these questions. Where are you planted? In the middle of the garden, where can you make the most transformation? Or out in the desert where YOU'LL live but you won't have any effect on anyone else? Is your love spreading to those who need it right now and offering support, or are you only willing to offer that support and shade to those you deem worthy? I think I have said this to this family here before: if I had to choose between my religion or another person (i.e., my neighbor), I'd choose that person every...single...time. Jesus NEVER commanded me to love my religion. And finally, are you the reason people love Jesus or hate Christians?

Amen.