

“Shelter Beyond our Borders”
Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
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Pentecost 4B 2018
Mark 4: 26-34

Once again, Jesus is talking in parables—he’s telling stories that are about ordinary things to talk about something extraordinary. All of these parables—these stories—are about the Kingdom of God—the Reign of God—what it looks like when God’s purposes are done. In these two stories, Jesus is trying to give us a picture of how God works and what God is like—and what is important to God.

I’m going to focus on the second parable, but I want to say a word about this first one—because it reminds us of how God works. Seeds are scattered—thrown indiscriminately on the ground—and they take root and grow. This is not the picture of a carefully planted and tended garden, where we as the gardeners work tirelessly to weed and water and keep deer out. These are seeds that *just grow*.

We’ve got a congregation with a lot of do-ers in it—and there are other parables that really do talk about what we do and how we participate in the work of God in this world. I put myself in that group, so I know there is a little push back against this picture of seeds that just grow with no hard work on our part.

But I think it is super important that we hear this word from Jesus—*because it really is Good News*.

God is at work in this world. God is bringing growth and healing and new life in ways that we do not know or see until they suddenly appear.

We work hard at ministry—for the things that we know God cares about—and it is good and loving and wonderful. But there’s a temptation that comes with all this hard work—and that is to forget about what *God* is doing. Yes, of course, God works through us. But God is not *limited* to working through us—God’s work in the world is like a seed that a farmer just throws out there—a seed that the farmer doesn’t even know has been planted—a seed that, all of a sudden, appears as a plant.

It does not *all* depend on us and our carefully devised plans. It is good news to hear Jesus say that God is at work in ways that we do not now see.

I want to shift now to the second parable—and the connection between these two which would have been obvious to the first people hearing these stories.

No one would ever have planted mustard. Mustard just grows like crazy and takes over—the way mint or bamboo does now. No one who knows anything about planting would have planted a mustard seed. Mustard was not valued but boy does it grow. It doesn’t stay in its place. It pushes the boundaries.

Mustard is also beautiful—if you’ve ever driven by a mustard field and seen the bright yellow, you know what I mean. And it brings flavor. And it also has medicinal properties—it is healing.

And the kind of mustard plant Jesus is talking about can grow really big—8 or 10 feet tall, with big branches. It is not the greatest of all shrubs—just like the mustard seed is a small seed but not the smallest. But Jesus makes the point that something significant can come from a very small beginning.

Again, *this is the way God works*. It's the important counter message to just being a drop in a bucket where who you are or the small actions you take don't seem to matter at all.

Jesus paints a beautiful picture here. He says this little mustard seed grows into this big shrub with large branches—branches that extend and can bear some weight—branches that can be a place for birds to make nests.

I'm really drawn to this part of the story today—and I think it could be an image of the church. A nest is a place where birds can rest safely—away from other animals that might eat them. It's a place where new life can hatch. A nest is a place where a mother bird can safely leave her new babies and go out and get food for them. And it's a place where old birds and young birds alike can just stop for a moment and get their strength and energy back.

What if what we're doing is being the branches—the branches that extend and that provide shade because they've got lots of leaves or mustard. Growth that God has given and is giving.

These images of Jesus are interesting because I think we can find ourselves in different places at the same time. I'm guessing that for many of us, this church is a place where we can make our nest—where we can land after a hard week or during some hard times. But it's also a place where we are the branches—we provide the safety and the shelter for others—some we know quite well—and others that might just land for a minute and then fly off.

A year ago, if you had told me that we would be traveling to Houston—to the National Youth Gathering—with 10 teens and 2 adults—I would not have believed it.

If you had told me we would have a youth group that has these 10 teens plus another 6, half of whom are coming from the neighborhood—or if you had told me we would have a Youth Group that has gotten together at least once a month for the last 14 months—usually with around a dozen youth—I would have said that it wouldn't be realistic to expect that.

To be honest, I probably wouldn't have said *that* but I would have been thinking *that*. I would have been thinking that because it is our human tendency to hedge our bets—to not put ourselves out there too far in terms of expectations. That's why it is *so* good that we have this word from God—this word that reminds us that *God* is at work in this world—that God takes our small seeds of faith and vision and brings growth *we could never imagine*.

So, I think God is giving us our own parable here—our own picture—our own story to live into and toward. God is showing us that we are a mustard shrub—that we have branches that can hold nests—that we can be a landing place—a place of safety and renewal and new life.

Being a teen today is not easy. The truth is that it has never been easy. I remember as a teen, hearing adults say how this is the best time of your life, so you better well enjoy it. And I remember thinking, "I sure hope they're wrong."

They were. As an adult, I have more responsibility but I know much more about who I am. The ground I stand on is more solid. I have relationships that can be counted on.

There's a lot of shifting sand when you're a teen. Inside of you and around you. You're flying here and flying there—trying lots of new things which is really what this stage of life is about. Sometimes you make some really big mistakes. The church community can offer a place to land. A place where you are reminded that no matter what you've done, you can't make God stop loving you. A place where you can experience—however imperfectly—the safety and security of knowing that you are important to God—that you are accepted as you are right now—that you don't have to prove that you're worthy. God loves you. Period.

The church community is also the place where you can grow—where you can be a branch that extends itself—a branch that offers shade to people who need it.

Today, we have the magnificent privilege of blessing our youth—of celebrating the small seed that has grown so wildly.

We also have another story—a wrenching one—that is tearing at our hearts. I got this email from one of you: *We will be blessing our youth for the Youth Gathering on Sunday, thankfully, but, meanwhile, this goes on in our nation. I'm sick, and I know I'm not the only one. What can we do as a congregation, as a church body? We have to speak out at this concentration-camp-style treatment of children.*

On May 7th, the Attorney General announced that there would be a new policy regarding the families who are coming across our southern border without visas. Previously, parents and children were detained and kept in detention centers together—an awful policy but one that was in place during the Obama administration. With this new policy, children of all ages—including babies who are breastfeeding—are being torn away from their parents. The parents are put in jail and the children are put in what they call “shelters.”

One of the largest shelters is called, “Casa Padre”, Father's House—which seems particularly ironic. They insist that these are not detention centers—but the kids cannot leave. Many, many people are speaking out against this forcible separation of children from their parents—including a wide range of Christians from the Catholic Bishops to the Southern Baptists.

What does it look like to be the church in response to this? How do we extend our branches—provide real shelter—by speaking out against this hard-hearted policy? As one church leader said, “People will look back on this period of time and ask: ‘Who said what?’”

There are many avenues to respond, including bills in Congress that spell out very specific ways to address this. I think this is a moment when it is important to do this explicitly out of a place of faith—a moment when we show what Christian love looks like, what being a mustard bush that offers shade and rest and a place to land looks like. We do not live on the border and we cannot literally offer shelter but we can offer the shelter of our advocacy and our protest for their humane treatment.

God has given us the amazing gift of being a mustard shrub that just keeps growing—that can't contain itself—that spreads and keeps growing, offering shelter way beyond the borders of where that little seed was planted. Thanks be to God. Amen.