Matthew 13:31-32: "He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Sometimes the hardest Biblical text to hear is one that we already know. Here we have Jesus' parable about the mustard seed, that “smallest of all seeds.” And what quickly come to my mind are things like “Mighty oaks from little acorns grow” or “The journey of 1,000 miles begins with the first step.” Great things, in other words, come from small beginnings.

However, what I am doing is confusing two different texts. At another point in Jesus’ ministry, he says having faith the size of mustard seed is enough to move a mountain (Matthew 17:20). So, yes, there is encouragement for confidence that small beginnings in our lives may have huge payoffs. However, that is not what is before us today: This parable does not compare our faith to a mustard seed. This parable sees the growth and maturation into a tree as a reference to the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, this is a parable about how God's ruling presence is in and among us. When Jesus talked of the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God,” he did not mean the “sweet bye and bye”—the destination choice of the faithful at the end of our days. No, he said, this kingdom is already in and among us. And so the parable addresses how we see that kingdom among us.

The kingdom of heaven says Jesus, is like someone planting a mustard seed, a tiny seed, which grows into a small tree so that birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. God’s ruling presence in our lives is like this, so the interpretive question to answer is this: “Where are we in the parable?”

For instance, consider the opening parable here in 13th chapter of Matthew. The parable section opens with the parable of the sower—that’s where the farmer casts his seed on the field, with some seed falling on the pathway, some on the rocky ground, some in the thorny area, and some on the good soil. In three of these cases, the seeds do not do well—the path, the rocky ground, and the thorny areas. And the question— “Where are we in the parable?”—is easy. Am I like the path, the rocky ground, or thorny ground? Or, am I good soil that produces abundantly?

But what of this parable of the mustard seed? Where are we in this parable? Are we the planter of the mustard seed? Not likely if this is the kingdom of heaven. The planter of the seed would be God or Jesus, right? Are we the mustard seed? Again, not likely. No matter how highly we may think of ourselves, I doubt we view ourselves as being the fulfillment of God’s kingdom. And this is a singular seed with a singular mustard bush—not an orchard of mustard plants. In fact, the only plural in the parable is the “birds.”

Maybe that’s the clue: the only plural is the birds—the birds that benefit from the growth of the mustard seed into a sheltering tree…the birds that have nothing to do with the planting or maturing of the tree. God’s kingdom is growing from small beginnings, yes! But the kingdom is sheltering...
and protecting occupants who had nothing to do with the planting and growing. The only plural in
the parable, the birds...why they are us!

In sharp contrast to the parable of the sower—a parable that demands action, that demands
decision-making, and that demands responsibility, we have a parable about the incredible growth of
the kingdom of heaven and the benefit it provides to the birds—benefits the birds had nothing do
with. The birds did not plant or cause the tree to grow. In fact, it would be fair to suggest that birds
are clueless as to how the mustard seed was planted and grew into being a tree. The birds just take
advantage of what is there.

The birds of the air are simply beneficiaries. They did not work for the kingdom. They did not
bring in the kingdom. They did not even build on the foundation made by God. Now there are
certainly Biblical texts that address our responsibility, and indeed our need to respond. There are
certainly Biblical texts that demand we do something to assist in the building up of God's kingdom.
This is NOT one of them.

The scandal of this parable is that the birds do nothing but benefit from the kingdom that grows,
supports, and provides. The mustard bush or tree is a “Jehovah jireh” tree—the Lord provides.
And there is nothing about whether you have said “I have decided to follow Jesus.” Nothing about
obedience or duty or even being saved. Without any work or influence on our part, the kingdom
grows around us and provides.

Where were you, for example, when the foundations of this sanctuary were laid? Not even our
oldest member, Walter Pulliam, in his hundredeth year of life, was around for laying of that
foundation. Yet we all benefit. Where were you when some frightened men gathered in
Philadelphia and put their lives and livelihood on the line by signing a document that said, “We hold
these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness?”
Yet we all benefit. Where were you when a certain Abraham Lincoln interpreted that statement that
“all men are created equal” to mean all people of all ethnic descent? Over and over again, we could
ask ourselves, “What was our part in the benefits that surround us and support us?” And the
answer is the same: We were not there.

This parable of the mustard seed is a reminder...a humbling reminder that God’s kingdom is
growing and sheltering us without any effort or work on our part. So, what is our response to the
benefits?

One parallel might be the words to the people of Israel found in Deuteronomy 6. Here the
preacher of Deuteronomy speaks to the people who are occupying the Promised Land:

10 When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors,
to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did
not build, 11 houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you
did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten
your fill, 12 take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of
Egypt, out of the house of slavery.... (Deut. 6:10-12)
In other words, when they came into the Promised Land they ate fruit from trees that did not plant, drank water from wells they did not dig, and had wine from vineyards that they did not make. And the preacher of Deuteronomy says: When you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord. In other words, unlike the birds of the air that simply benefit from the tree, be human beings with memory and awareness. Remember all that has come your way without your effort and work. And be aware of the kingdom in and among you. So, how are we more self aware than the birds—aware that this is God’s world?

C.S. Lewis once made the observation that connects to this awareness. He said human beings are “amphibious.” No, not amphibious like a frog that lives in water and on the ground, but rather that we are “half spirit and half animal.” “Amphibious” means to move between two worlds. That is, at our best, we move between the spirit and the animal…at our best. At our worst, we are just the animal—seeking shelter, enjoying what feels good, and avoiding pain—living unaware. But at our best we are “amphibious”—moving in the midst of this world, with eyes open to the presence of God’s kingdom.

A recent book by Micha Boyett addresses how we find God in the commonplace—that is, in the world. The title of her book is *Found: A Story of Questions, Grace, and Everyday Prayer*. For example, she writes as a young mother changing diapers and in the midst of that aromatic human by-product that fills the diaper, she is thinking about the wonder of the resurrection. She finds that she is found by God. In another reflection, she is beset by inadequacy. She is preparing her home for a dinner party for her husband’s colleagues—important people of worth and work. She feels that she is ordinary, plain, and lacking of importance. The lie, the falsehood of her life, is that she is no better than the pretty apron that she wearing. She writes:

> Then, in the middle of that thought, I stop mopping. I prop the mop against the wall and look at my apron, which is absolutely as adorable as the lie in my brain said it was. . . . “Lord,” I say, “I am not ironing and mopping because I have nothing better to do. I am ironing and mopping because I get to take care of some people who deserve to be taken care of.” I sit there with my eyes closed, and I feel God’s nearness, the weight of the Spirit pressing in. I imagine God laying his hands on my head and pulling out the lie. His fingers pinch the gray cloud of a thought and then he throws it out. “Thank you,” I whisper.  

God pinches the “lie” and throws it out. One of the central realizations—“ahas”—for Micha Boyett is that she does not need to earn God’s favor and grace. That favor and grace is already here. She sees herself as “found”—not so much her longing, striving, seeking, and working for God but rather God is longing, striving, seeking, and working for her!

Seeing God’s kingdom here and among us…much like the poem written by a Presbyterian minister: Maltbie Babcock (a poem we are going to sing this morning). More than just an ode to nature, Rev. Babcock addressed in 16 verses the variety of ways that we experience God’s kingdom. We sing only a few of them…we sing:

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This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres. Yes, if I focus my hearing, God’s voice will be heard in the confusing noises around me.

This is my Father’s world, he shines in all that’s fair; in the rustling grass I hear him pass; he speaks to me everywhere. Yes, if I open the eyes of my heart, I will see God shining “in all that’s fair.”

This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. Yes, very real evil and tragedy that mark my life –but this will not have the last word: God’s kingdom, God’s rule, still claims me.

Like the birds of the air, we are sheltered and protected in the branches of the mustard seed tree. But be amphibious, as C.S. Lewis said: half-animal and half-spirit. Remember and be aware: “This is my Father’s world.”