

July 23, 2017 • Celebration of New Appointments

## “Hidden in the Smallest Things”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



*Matthew 13:31-35*

*He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 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.” He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”*

A wondrous thing happened while I was away at a Continuing Education workshop last week: a family of hawks moved into our neighborhood. It was a striking development in the Regent Square area north of Montana. A cast of hawks, made up, as best we could tell, of a very large mother hawk and her three teenagers hatched earlier this Spring. Mama Hawk has been teaching the youngsters how to fly, how to glide on invisible currents of air, and how to hunt, directing their efforts with her whistles and calls.

A bit of research revealed that these particular hawks, Cooper’s Hawks, we think, prefer to dine on small birds. We verified this when the remains of one such unlucky creature was left, for a time, on our garage roof. Fortunately, for us, it disappeared as quickly as it came.

Sure enough--the hawk family moved in and overnight in the Regent Square neighborhood, all the medium-sized and small birds disappeared, hiding, taking cover. The doves and the songbirds who had been serenading us each morning and evening. All the little birds vanished from sight, sensing their vulnerability.

Now in the parables we hear today, Jesus uses images of little things, the littlest things even, to show his disciples what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Jesus often taught by using parables-- seemingly simple stories intended to spark our imagination and invite us into God’s story. In today’s reading, he speaks of mustard seeds, the smallest of seeds, a mere pinch of yeast that leavens the loaf. He said: the kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed, a pinch of yeast. Things almost imperceptible to the eye, often unnoticed, unclaimed.

Back now to developments amongst the little things in our neighborhood. Though the small birds disappeared when the hawks arrived, the littlest birds remained. Hummingbirds, the smallest of all birds. Apparently hummingbirds are of no interest to hawks, not even as tasty appetizers. The small birds disappeared, but the hummingbirds carried on, flitting from flower to flower, even pausing to rest, briefly, on the branches of our Hong Kong orchid tree in the front yard and the ash tree in the back. Shimmering when the light catches their beautiful iridescent plumage. Playful, joyous, skipping and dancing from flower to flower.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like these littlest of things, Jesus said.

It’s no accident that beaded hummingbirds grace our paraments and clergy stoles in this summer season of the church year. Ordinary Time, it is called, on the church calendar. Ordinary days and weeks and Sundays when there’s plenty of time to tell the stories of Jesus, the stories of the church, the stories of the Kingdom of Heaven.

A number of years ago, a group of very talented folks from the congregation set out to design and create new paraments for our worship. We researched the colors and symbols of each season of the church year. The color of Ordinary Time is green—symbolizing life and growth and the vitality of God’s creation. We then chose to go with flora and fauna indigenous to our context—the graceful palm fronds and the hummingbirds that draw us into the worship of God each week.

As we delved into the symbols of this season of green and growth, we discovered that in many cultures in Central America, the hummingbird is seen as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, flitting as it does back and forth, back and forth, between heaven and earth, if even there is a between.

The littlest of birds. A sign of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus taught, is like the smallest of things. A hummingbird, a mustard seed, a pinch of yeast. Images of the Kingdom of Heaven for the days, the worship, the ministry of Ordinary Time.

How very fitting for the day on which we reaffirm and celebrate our bishop’s appointments of Robert, Keri, and myself to ministry in this exciting congregation. The new appointment year actually began officially on July 1st, but we’re celebrating today because it’s one of the few Sundays this summer when all three of us are in town. I’m sorry that we couldn’t figure out when to do this and get Tricia here, too. As you know, she’s in Bland, Virginia, with our fabulous Youth Service Project Team which returns tomorrow. We hold her and our whole team in our hearts and prayers this day.

Still, the thing is, God chooses pretty ordinary people for the work of ministry. Think of the disciples Jesus picked, tapping ordinary fishermen, sinners and tax collectors, and a few women to his work of teaching, preaching, and healing. He even pointed us to children, saying: to such as these belongs the Kingdom of Heaven.

By the grace of God, some of us ordinary people are called into ordained ministry, and set apart by the church for the work of elder and deacon, sharing in the ministry of Christ and of the whole church, through preaching, teaching, healing, service, and representing the church to the world.

But remember, as our services of consecration and ordination affirm—ALL baptized Christians are called to share in Christ's ministry of love and service in the world, to the glory of God and for the redemption of the human family and the whole of creation. The celebration of appointments this day is a celebration of the common ministry we share together, all us "ordinary people"—no offense intended!—called by God, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, entrusted by God through Christ Jesus, to be the face, the hands, the presence, the heart of God in and for this world.

We may and do sometimes feel insignificant and unworthy of such a calling. As seemingly insignificant as a tiny mustard seed or a sparring pinch of yeast or a hummingbird whose wings seem never to flap fast enough. So often our efforts seem to make little difference in the great scheme of things. Sometimes we feel helpless as we strive to support the people closest to us, let alone the overwhelming challenges facing our world. Who are we? What difference do we make?

Yet, Jesus knew, when he first enlisted those ordinary fishermen to be his disciples, and still it's true of the likes of each and every one of us, he knew that through our smallest efforts, our stammering words, our imperfect attempts, our foreshortened prayer...the Kingdom of Heaven becomes incarnate in this world. God is transforming the world that the Kingdom may be on earth as in heaven. God is transforming the world through each one us. The Spirit of God is present and alive even in the smallest of our actions, our words, our prayers.

We plant the mustard seeds of hope. We add the pinch of yeast that leavens the vision. We celebrate the flower that blossoms into mercy and self-giving love.

The smallest things, Jesus said—babies and children, mustard seeds and yeast, hummingbirds—the smallest things change everything. They change how we feel about ourselves and our own unique potential and, over time, they change the world into the glory of God.

A week later now, the hawks have moved on, where I do not know. The little birds have returned and the hummingbirds remain. And the Spirit abides...in me, in us, in you.

May God bless unto us a rich and delightful year of faithful ministry and service together.

Thanks be to God!