

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, July 26, 2026

The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz

on

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

+

Branches for the Birds

When I was a child, my dear mother saw to it that, each spring, certain special visitors came to our home. She was the one who knew of a potion to summon them. Three parts water. One part sugar. And she would fill a canister with this simple syrup outside the window of our den. It had tiny holes and a tiny railing. And after a few days, my sister and I, if we chanced to look out at just the right time, we might be able to spy through the glass our visitor, a living jewel shimmering in the bright sun, a jewel with wings so swift they hardly could be seen. We couldn't tell if he could see us through the glass, but he always came to us on the lookout, rarely finding time to rest, never taking longer than was required to drink his fill from my mother's offering, and then, for some speedy delivery, he would dart out of our sight, impossibly fast into the blue sky. And so the delicate wonder of the ruby-throated hummingbird set its seal upon my heart forever.

Who else but God could devise such a visitor? "What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?" And like the Tyger, I would never have dreamt that you could "keep" a hummingbird. Perhaps you could try, but how horrible! They cannot be possessed or domesticated in any real sense. All that is to be done is to create a home that they wish to visit, know what they appreciate, know the simple formula of hospitality, and if they choose to draw close, for however fleeting a moment it might be, in their visitation your home becomes their home, one home, the house of God.

When we remember the parable of the kingdom of heaven about the mustard seed, it is not just a demonstration of how even small things matter in God's kingdom, but it closes with the image of what the mustard seed is meant to become! The mustard seed is not there for the usual uses of the mustard plant: for spices, greens, or medicinal uses. In fact, Jesus doesn't even mention the harvest. There is no meal, no sale, the farmer has planted for the sake of something spiritually compelling, not useful for his business. "so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." The mustard plant is not there to merely punch above its weight and then be harvested and sold for parts, instead that tiniest of seeds becomes the place of refuge for creatures from above, reaching out and beckoning these visitors with its shady branches to host a little slice of heaven, where colorful plumage and music may abide in peace.

Some of the other parables which accompany the parable of the mustard seed don't really get into this dynamic. So the tiny yeast leavened the bread. Who did the woman bake it for? Her children, her beloved? Did they appreciate it?

The man who sold all he had for the field with buried treasure, and the man that did the same for that pearl of great price, what did they do with all that wealth? Did they keep the treasure on their shelf, or did they use that wealth to fund more treasure hunts, or did they retire and build a four star bed and breakfast for pilgrims?

Unlike the farmer in the mustard parable, we can only guess at the upshot, but in all these cases, these people are working with a deeper, hidden knowledge of the world that makes their lives materially better. The woman knew the microscopic agent that would make her bread more nourishing. One man could fathom the depths of a field. The other could distinguish the subtle distinctions of luster and overtone between pearls that only a discerning eye could perceive.

Hidden knowledge runs through all these parables. But this is not simply for the sake of hidden knowledge itself. Each secret of the Kingdom is given for a good reason: so that the world may become something more than it was before. Something better.

The mustard seed reaches its perfection not merely when it has grown, but when its branches have become a place of refuge and hospitality. It has made room for a life beyond its own.

This points to the deeper life of Creation itself, what all this is for. God does not simply will that the earth should exist, nor merely that it should flourish according to its own nature. He intends that it should become a fitting dwelling for his own life.

The Garden, in the Beginning, is where God walks. The Tabernacle is where God dwells. The Temple is where heaven touches earth. Our Lord Jesus is God tabernacling among us. The Church becomes “a dwelling place for God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). Finally, Revelation ends not with souls escaping earth but with heaven descending from above to be joined with earth. “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

So the deep purpose of creation is not exhausted by growth, abundance, or even fruitfulness. Its highest calling is hospitality. Humanity comes to its fullest stature when it becomes a place where the life of heaven may gladly dwell.

This is what we ask every time we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We are asking for more than imitation. We are asking that heaven should increasingly make its home here, until every faithful heart, every household, every parish church, and indeed the whole creation stretches out its branches like the mustard shrub, inviting the joyful commerce of heaven and earth.

There is, after all, a profound difference between building a fortress in the kingdom of this world and cultivating a garden in the Kingdom of Heaven. A fortress exists to seize territory, to repel strangers, to keep enemies without and prisoners within. It is built upon fear, measured by its strength, and guarded by force.

A garden is built upon an altogether different wisdom. It cannot compel a butterfly to linger, a bird to sing, or a hummingbird to descend. It simply creates the conditions in which life is glad to flourish. It offers beauty without demanding possession, sweetness without coercion, shelter without chains.

The Kingdom of God grows in just this way. It advances not by enclosing itself, but by becoming the sort of place where unexpected visitors delight to come and abide. The hummingbird cannot be possessed. He

can only be welcomed. A hummingbird feeder cannot command a hummingbird to come. It simply says, “Here is sweetness, if you wish it.”

Jesus closes this whole collection of parables, not with another hidden thing, but with a great net cast into the sea. The net gathers fish of every kind until, at the last, the angels themselves come to separate the good from the bad. The final question is no longer whether we have discovered the hidden treasure or recognized the pearl of great price. It is what sort of people those discoveries have made us. Have we spent our lives grasping, possessing, enclosing, and consuming? Or have we become, like the mustard shrub, places where another life could freely dwell, whether for a moment or a lifetime?

The hummingbird was never mine. That was precisely its glory. My mother did not keep hummingbirds. She simply prepared a place where one might, by its own mysterious freedom, choose to visit. This is the deep lesson the Kingdom has to teach us. Heaven is not something we capture. It is something we welcome. The life of faith is the slow work of becoming so hospitable to goodness, truth, beauty, and love that the life of heaven finds itself at home among us. The visit may seem fleeting, as brief as the flash of ruby feathers in the summer sun, but what comes from heaven is never fleeting in the mind of God. Every visitation of grace belongs already to eternity. Every moment in which heaven touches earth is gathered up into that Kingdom where, at last, “the dwelling of God is with us.”

If you should ever find yourself watching a hummingbird, don’t wish you could keep it. Simply give thanks that, for one beautiful moment, your world became a place it wished to visit.

May God grant us the grace to become the sort of people among whom such wonders feel at home. And may every fleeting glimpse of goodness, truth, beauty, or love remind us that they are not passing away, but drawing us toward that everlasting day when heaven and earth shall finally be one, and God shall be all in all.

Amen.
