With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?

It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth branches, so that the birds of the air can make nest in its shade.

The meaning of the parable of the mustard seed seems so apparent, doesn’t it?

What begins as the tiniest of seeds grows into a shrub large enough to house the birds. The reign of God is like that. Small beginning. Big ending . . .

You know, the whole “from little acorns, great oaks grow” thing. Except . . . did you notice that at the end of the parable—the kingdom of God ends up being, well, for the birds.

That can’t be right, can it?

Or maybe . . . it is.

That’s the thing about Jesus’ parables. Parables are more than just a good story, or a simple and useful illustration to make things clearer. If anything, they may make things more obscure to the hard-hearted and the close-minded. Parables make us think, and think hard.

It's been said that as soon as you think you understand what a parable means, you probably don't. I generally find that as much as I try to interpret the parables, they always end up interpreting me.
Parables engage two very different realities and use one to throw light on the deeper meaning of the other, challenging our imaginations and our ability to see "connections" we might otherwise miss.

They are—as one theologian has put it—"trap doors” into another world, another reality.

That image of the trapdoor into another world, another reality certainly is rather dramatic and, puts me in mind of Alice falling down the rabbit hole; we may not find that other world, that other reality is a place we find difficult to inhabit, certainly difficult to fully understand and interpret.

Are we ready for a kingdom that is for the birds?
That is, are we ready for a kingdom that flourishes for the benefit of others?
Are we ready for the cost of discipleship?
For Mark would have us know that this isn’t just a quaint story; it is the truth of our own lives.

*The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.*

God’s reign is like this small seed because God’s reign began with insignificance. What could be a less likely beginning for the establishment of God’s reign than a peasant teacher from Galilee and his rag-tag group of disciples?

This was God’s *Messiah*?

These were the people through whom God was going to change the world?

Not likely.

Not likely at all.

They were practically nothing.

They were like, well, like a mustard seed.
But even more, the mustard seed is a metaphor for the way God works in the world. God begins with weakness and insignificance and the fragility of promise and God works through those things, and somehow (yet we don’t know how) they become God’s salvation, 
*even though the world is likely to continue to regard them from a human point of view as weak, powerless, and insignificant,* through a word of promise that seems as fragile as a tiny seed.

God’s work in the world is the life together of God’s people, and in scripture, God’s people are seldom impressive by any standards except God’s—a perspective we might call God’s birds’-eye view.

Just think on this: God enters the world as a peasant from an obscure Middle Eastern tribe, as an infant born to a poor unwed teenager. When that infant grows to become a great teacher with many followers, he suffers a shameful death at the hands of the Roman Empire (one of the greatest empires in all of history). When God breaks into history and raises his Son from the dead—making the dry wood of the Cross flourish, Jesus leaves his work in the hands of the very people who abandoned him, who scattered and flew away from him as he suffered and died. When God sends the Holy Spirit to empower them to preach and demonstrate the reality of God’s reign, they gather followers who turn out to be every bit as weak and ambivalent as the people Israel had ever been.
And still, God continues to work, 
and the Kingdom is planted, 
and it grows, and birds take shelter in its branches.

*The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed . . .*  
Here’s the thing about seeds, when sown, they don’t remain seeds.

At Redeemer’s leave taking service on January 5th in 2014, we heard these words of Jesus from the gospel of John:  
*“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

In the context of the John’s gospel, Jesus was referring to his imminent crucifixion and resurrection, but in a broader sense, Jesus speaks to every treasure we have, especially the greatest gift—life itself.  
If we hang back, protecting ourselves from the challenges of life, we remain no more than a seed, valuable for our potential, but otherwise useless.

Now some seeds serve a dual purpose: they serve as food, as well as filling their essential function as seeds.  
**But all seeds share an inherent power to become something far greater than what they are.**  
By God’s grace, we share this inner dynamic with seeds.  
If we fall into the ground and die, as a seed does when it is planted, we can become radically greater—and of greater use—than we are now.

Today the legacy of Redeemer bears bold and courageous witness to these things.
You could say that in the life cycle of the seed, Redeemer reached its full maturity and the time for harvest has come and it is time to share some of the bounty of God’s kingdom and scatter more seeds. God is scattering seeds of faith, hope and love through the distribution of their legacy to be sure. But also in our shared life together here at Holy Trinity.

Without doubt it's difficult to know the ways of God, so often hidden from view or not detected (or noticed) by us. Nevertheless God is at work always and everywhere, bringing about God's will in unexpected and marvelous ways, like the amazing things that can grow from the smallest seeds.

There is, of course, much more to these parables but we have made a good beginning.

We live not so much in optimism that thinks we can fix everything, but out of the hope born of confidence that God is present and working through all things, to overcome evil with good, to make all things new. And we are called to participate in what God is doing in the world.

That is why we find flashes of brilliant hope and the promise of a greater day to come. They may only be flashes, but they are powerful epiphanies nevertheless. Here and there we have glimpses of the kingdom in longed-for reconciliation within families and among friends, in healing from illness and grief, in the decisions by a community that places its most vulnerable members at the top of its agenda rather than at the bottom, in sharing and celebration and the release of grudges,
in the end of war and the seeking of peace,
in the breaking of bread
and the nourishment of our souls and our bodies,
in giving voice to the voiceless
and lifting up the hopes of those in despair,
we see the mysterious ways of God.

It may begin, or seem to persist, in smallness,
in small steps and small hopes,
but the path, Jesus says, leads to greatness,
a greatness we cannot see or even imagine today.

God can imagine it,
God’s birds’-eye view can see it,
and most of all,
God intends the shelter and goodness of
his kingdom for you and me and all living things.
Come, beloved birds nesting in the shelter of treetop,
it’s time to scatter the seeds of the kingdom!