

One of the changes that we've seen in the Rectory since the beginning of the pandemic is that, on the third floor at least, we are now hemmed in on all sides with a constant flurry of pigeons. We've had pigeons before, don't get me wrong, but the number of pigeons squatting on our windowsills has grown exponentially in the past four months. There are whole armies of them, or, to use the proper collective noun used for pigeons - whole droppings of them. We can hear them skulking around behind closed blinds. We can hear them crash land on our air conditioners. We can hear them fighting and...er...making new friends. Their cooing and fluttering and scratching haunt us in almost every room of the house. It all makes me very glad I've never watched the Hitchcock film *The Birds*.

It goes without saying that they drive my dog INSANE. Lily spends her days bolting from one window to the next, sticking her head under curtains and jumping up on radiator covers in desperate, futile attempts to **just get at these feathery things that make so much**

**noise outside windows in what is very clearly her territory.** And, true to her beagley nature, if she can't get at it, well then she just barks at it, loudly and forever.

I don't know if you can tell, but I've become quite hostile to these birds. I wasn't always. My mom used to tell the story of my first trip to the big city when I was 3 or 4. We came out of a department store and waded into a lake of iridescent bobbing and cooing. My eyes went wide, and my face broke into an ecstatic smile. "Look, Mommy!" I exclaimed with wonder. "Pigeons!" Everyone in the crowd around me instantly burst out laughing. As delighted as I was then is as harassed as I feel now. I'm tired of their noise, I'm tired of their poop, and I'm tired of the way their presence invades the peace and quiet of my home. I've been on a real anti-pigeon streak for weeks now.

That is, until last week, when my husband showed me that one of them had started building a nest on the windowsill outside our study window. Now, intellectually, I understand that a nest means

baby pigeons, which is not exactly solving the problem, but something about watching this little bird lug these unwieldy branches all the way up to the third floor and then cram them into this impossibly tight corner, where there is no sun and the only views are of plain brick walls – I don't know, something about that hope, that diligence, that sense of responsibility moved me. I felt how that bird just needed to find a place – any place, no matter how small or lonely or dark or dingy, that might afford him with half a chance to just make a home. Sure I'd rather have a cardinal out there, or a finch, or a bald eagle, but the sight of this humble little nest, the sign of yearning for home where there is no room, has – just a bit – softened my heart.

The mustard bush is the pigeon of bushes. If a tiny first-century girl had walked into a field with her mother and cried, "Look, Mommy! A mustard bush!" the adults around her would surely have broken into gales of laughter. There was nothing wondrous about a mustard bush. It wasn't beautiful. It wasn't grand. It wasn't really all

that big, despite Jesus' parabolic optimism. It didn't have the purpose of an olive tree or a cedar of Lebanon. It was a weed; it was something you wanted to not plant, something to rip out.

And yet it is this bush, this lowly, unappreciated, annoying, mess of a bush that Jesus says is like the kingdom of heaven. It is this aggravating, unhelpful, ugly, useless bush that Jesus points to as a place of blessing. And, remarkably, this bush didn't just spring up out of nowhere. This bush was planted. This bush was tended, fed and watered and weeded and nurtured. This bush was wanted, and it grew and stretched and spread out its branches so that it wasn't even really a bush but a tree, a substantial, purposeful, gift of a tree that grew so wide and so high that all the birds of the air could come and make a nest in its open arms. No more scrounging in dark corners with only bricks for a view. This tree had room for every bird, for whole flocks of birds, for murders of crows and flights of swallows and exaltations of larks and even plagues of pigeons to find a space and find home.

My friends, you kingdom of Christians, we are that bush. I know we like to think of ourselves as a rose bush or a rhododendron, but we, the Church, are that ordinary old mustard bush. We are not always beautiful. We are not always grand. We are not always spacious or soaring or bursting into bloom. We are not even always desired. But none of this changes our purpose, our work. Which is to grow. Which is to make room. Which is to keep stretching and spreading so that all the birds of the air – even the pigeons, *especially* the pigeons – can find room here. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a little church that someone took and planted in this world. And it grew and grew, making more and more room, inviting more and more people home.

This calling is not something that matters only when it is convenient for us. This weed of a bush keeps growing even though no one is looking at it with wonder. The bush keeps growing even though whole crowds of people would laugh to think that it means anything to anyone. The bush keeps growing even though other trees

grow nearby with seemingly more important offerings to make. The bush just keeps growing in the wind and the rain, in the heat and the cold, in times of plenty and in times of pandemic.

We all know the Church is good at making excuses for why we aren't growing. The world is more secular; Sunday mornings are for soccer now; years of hypocrisy and abuse have finally taken their toll. In the past four months we've added a whole new gaggle of excuses - we can't meet in person, we can't sing anymore, we just don't like Zoom. But my friends, the Kingdom of Heaven is like something that grows. That's us - that thing that is called to keep growing, no matter where and no matter when. That's us, the pigeon bush that the Holy Spirit carefully plants and tends and waters precisely because the She knows that the world needs more room. There are plenty of pigeons out there who are struggling to find a little corner of the world that feels safe, that feels like it was made for them, that just might start to feel like home.

Yes, that's right, I'm talking about Evangelism. I'm talking about assuming the right and proper posture of a disciple, which is to be always proclaiming, always preaching, always inviting, always seeking more pigeons. And I could talk about inviting people to Mass or Zoom worship, or to join us at 3pm for our parish prayer, or to contribute to our backpack program, or to come to Bible study, or to write a card to the residents of Hollywood House, or to come rest in the shade of the trees in our garden. All of that is good evangelism. But as a colleague of mine, Father David Gortner, teaches, evangelism is also about just naming Christ when you see him. Evangelism looks like pointing to a person, to a moment, to a ministry, and saying, "Look, everyone! Jesus!" This is what disciples do; this is how we proclaim the Gospel and preach to all nations. We stand in the world and we point to Christ and to his kingdom. Look, there he is in the person who chooses to act against racism. Look, there he is in the person who speaks out against violent, cruel misogyny. Look, there

he is in those who sacrifice their safety or health to care for others. There he is in those who work every day for justice for those our society has cast off. There he is in the teacher, in the friend, in the child. There he is in the broken, in the wounded, in the set upon and bloodied and burdened. Look, everyone! Jesus! – the one who tends this scrawny, struggling, beautiful, mighty little bush. There is room for you in its branches. There is room for your nest beside these altars. There is room for you, a place that only you can fill. Come and see. Come home.

*Preached by Mother Erika Takacs*

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