

June 13, 2021

Mark 4:26-34

“God Grows His Kingdom!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our gospel lesson for this morning Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God is like seed that is sown. The farmer sows the seed and sleeps by night and walks by day. He sees the seed growing but he cannot explain how it grows. The seed sprouts and grows until it is ripe and the farmer cuts it down because the harvest has come. **God Grows His Kingdom!**

Jesus says again that the kingdom of God is like a very small, insignificant mustard seed that grows larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. In Israel, what is considered in Jewish tradition to be the smallest seed can grow up ten to fifteen feet! The overall thought is very simple. **God Grows His Kingdom!** What is almost unnoticed becomes almost impossible to miss. So it is with the kingdom. It is out there for the world to see.

Now, the seed grows automatically. That is the idea of verse 28 where our Savior says that “the earth produces by itself.” The earth produces it and we really do not know how. It is mysterious. Indeed, it is mysterious that the speaking of God’s Holy Word can somehow create his gracious rule in the hearts of human beings. In fact, it is as mysterious as death and resurrection.

Jesus says of his own death and resurrection, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).” And of our resurrected body, the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:36, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” As you can see, there is a lot of mystery surrounding the sowing of seed and what it does! But as **God Grows His Kingdom** through the seed of his speaking, so does he raise the dead! As Jesus cried out in a loud voice to Lazarus - “Come Out!” And Jesus says in John 6:40 about all those who believe in him and are a part of the kingdom: “... I will raise him up on the last day.”

Like the growing of seed that is sown the kingdom grows. We do not know how. We only know that God has promised that it will. God has promised that we will rise from the dead, and who among us can even slightly comprehend how it is that dying leads to the rising of something greater than what it was before? Perhaps the old saying is in part true - “Ignorance is bliss.” Simply to have facts of Jesus and his promise certainly takes the strain of trying to figure out what is utterly impossible from our standpoint. The fact is that the seed is growing and a mustard plant has appeared so that the birds of this unbelieving generation derive benefits from it, even though they are currently trying to tear down the tree.

It is nothing short of a miracle that we believe and are a part of his kingdom and look forward to his forever gracious rule in our resurrection from the dead! And yet there are so many in the church today who do not content themselves with something that they cannot understand and explain. Such even go so far as to think that we are the one’s who grow the kingdom. People in the church often want to explain the growth or decline of the church in terms of what they are doing or not doing. They fall into the thinking that they are the ones who are in control of the whole thing, even believing that if they state a goal they can make the results happen. But God gives us seed to sow and that’s all. It is a great privilege to do this, but it does not mean that the growth of the church is up to us.

Take for example churches that panic because of shrinking numbers. They ask, “What are we going to do to keep the ship from sinking?” as if it is all in our power. John the Baptist had it right when his disciples were complaining to him about the decrease of his own prophetic ministry. He said, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven (John 3:27).” And if we are not convinced by what the Baptist says, perhaps Psalm 127:1 will make it more clear: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” It is no wonder why the seven churches in the book of Revelation are simply bid by the Lord to be faithful to the Word of God. It doesn’t matter how big or small they are, for our Lord makes it clear that the only thing that really matters is faithfulness to the gospel.

If one wishes to fix a church that is shrinking or growing old, or even hopes that a loved one might be converted to Christ and reach heaven, or if it is as simple as we hope to grow in our own faith life, these are not accomplished by what we are going to do, but what God has done already in Christ. But, in case we have forgotten, the preaching of Christ is no guarantee of big numbers or a facility full of youth. Even Jesus had to contend with this reality after feeding the five thousand. After the powerful preaching of Jesus himself, the apostle John writes by the Holy Spirit that “... many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” Jesus even goes so far as to challenge the twelve by saying, “Do you want to go away as well?” And aside from Judas who is present, he goes on to say that he has chosen them to be his own, and ends with the incredibly clear statement: “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father (Jn. 6:66-71).”

In case we still don’t get it, let’s say it again: **God Grows His Kingdom!** It’s up to him and not to us, and that is what Jesus is highlighting in our two parables. What does the first parable say? It says, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground ... The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” The sufferings and death of Jesus on the cross has redeemed the whole world. There is forgiveness to be had by all. The seed has been given to us by Jesus through his Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. This seed is sown everywhere when the gospel is either publically preached in the local congregation, or whenever you privately take that seed and sow it into the lives of the people you come into contact with day by day. But how that seed grows or why it doesn’t grow is entirely in the hands of God. It is simply a privilege to take the seed that has been so graciously given to us and sow it. However, we must not think for a second that the gracious rule of God grows because of us.

Before us, God found the way to grow his kingdom according to his design, and when we are gone, do we have any doubt that he will continue to do it without us? It isn’t up to us to figure out the formula. It has already been figured out and given by our Lord in Mark 16:15-16, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” **God Grows His Kingdom** in his own time and in his own way. In fact, it is a good thing that it is entirely in his hands, for if the kingdom were in our hands ... well, need I say more?

Perhaps though we still cannot stand avoiding the questions. What are we going to do now that the church is shrinking? What are we going to do now that most young people really don’t want to hear what we have to say? What are we going to do about those who are by their current confession lost? What are

we going to do about our own walk with Jesus? What are we going to do with those who are opposed to us because of the gospel of Christ? The answer to all of those questions are found in our gospel text when Jesus says of the man who sowed the seed, “He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.” And the mustard tree is right before our eyes and for the world to see. In other words, we go about our daily business and live the life that God has given us. And having received the gospel ourselves, we take that very seed that we have received and sow it to others in the life we live, and we peacefully sleep and rise. We look to the Lord God for all things, and we trust him in all things, for he reassuringly says in Isaiah 55:10-11,

10 “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

God Grows His Kingdom!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott