

June 17, 2018

Mark 4:26-29

26 He said, “The kingdom of God is like this: A man scatters seed on the ground, 27 and while he sleeps and rises, night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28 The ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 When the crop is ready, he swings the sickle without delay, because the harvest has come.”

Whenever we pray the Second Petition, “**Your kingdom come,**” what are we asking for? People usually think that we are asking for Jesus to come on Judgment Day. But that’s not it. It’s talking about a spiritual kingdom where the Holy Spirit takes over the heart with Jesus and His peace and forgiveness right now. Consider your body and soul to be the ground in which the Holy Spirit works. He focuses you on and implants you in Jesus. You grow just like a plant.

Has God’s kingdom come here? How do we know? We see people worshiping Jesus here. We have people taking the body and blood of the Lord for the forgiveness of sins. We baptize our children and grandchildren. We come to Bible study. We pray at home and read the Bible at home. These are signs of life. None of this would be here if there was no kingdom of God here.

But sometimes we do the comparison game. We become obsessed with growth. We might say, “How come there aren’t MORE people here? Why aren’t people MORE excited about it? Why aren’t we doing more to get more people in to the kingdom?” How come your children or grandchildren are no longer coming to worship? Why aren’t we meeting our budget? Maybe we need to do what that church is doing. Then we’ll grow. Is that the solution?

What does Jesus say? He compares the kingdom of God to planting a field. What is the main point? When the seed is planted, it will grow. It is what the seed is designed to do - to grow. Trust the process. It is a simple point, but there is a lot we can draw from this simple point.

First of all, remember that God’s Word is active. The book of Hebrews says that it is “**living and active.**” Active in the sense that it cuts through the spiritual insides of you. It rips up your pride. It heals your guilt. It gives you hope in Jesus. The Holy Spirit makes Christians into shade trees for the world, feeding and nourishing the world. It was Christians who wanted to see slaves be freed. It was Christians who built hospitals. It is Christians who don’t want old people and sick people put to death: who try to protect the unborn. The Holy Spirit enables married couples to forgive each other and live with each other, when others would have gotten divorced. Expect God’s Word to work in you and in others.

Not every plant is the same. Sometimes, you might not even see the fruit. I can recall working with a rather prideful man who didn’t attend church much. When I tried to gently confront him, he became angry and defensive. But after he did so, he apologized, and he started to come to church more often. You might compare him to someone who came every Sunday and say, “He isn’t very fruitful. He’s kind of an angry and self absorbed jerk.” But from my viewpoint, it wasn’t as evident to see, but when I saw him, I was seeing some growth. Sometimes people look at a small church with a bunch of grey heads and say, “It is dying.” But maybe God looks at the hearts of those old grey heads and sees people who have a strong faith and believe in Christ as their Savior: who profess Jesus as Lord faithfully and don’t give in to the wants of their society. The problem isn’t with the church, but perhaps the people of their society have rejected their witness to the community.

Imagine if a farmer saw how another farmer bought big tractors and an irrigation system, and thought those were the keys to a nice crop, but he never bothered to plant seed. That would be a worthless farmer. When it comes down to necessities, you need the seed. It’s the whole reason you have a farm. So it is with the church. We enjoy good music and nice singing. It is so nice that we have air conditioning and heating along with a beautiful organ and stained glass windows. This has all been given to us over time and effort. But that is not what makes the church or faith grow. We need the seed for the church to grow. What is the seed? Wouldn’t it

be the Word and the sacraments that produces faith within and the works of faith? The seed is Jesus. The Holy Spirit wants to implant Jesus in the heart. Without the seed being planted you can't have a crop. It doesn't matter how big and how impressive the machinery is. If there isn't a crop, the farming equipment is useless. You have to have seed and trust that it will work.

This means that Jesus needs to be the center and motivation for our lives. He is the center of our preaching and our hymns. His death and resurrection gives baptism its power. His body and blood shed on the cross are what energize the Supper. His death gives us confidence that our sins are paid for. His life gives us hope that we too will live. His life is what our church year revolves around.

Another illustration might be the car. You could see a real hot rod and say, "I want to drive that car around." So you buy the car. You wax it. You paint it. You vacuum it out. But if you don't put any gas in the car, it won't run. Jesus is the gas. The car won't run without it, no matter how good it looks.

So we call people to repent and believe in Jesus. We keep on doing so no matter how long you've been a Christian. We baptize. Somehow, we trust that the Holy Spirit will work through it. Think of the story of Jonah in the Old Testament. Who would think that going through a town and yelling at them to repent would actually produce any fruits? Yet the king and the whole country repented of their sins, and God relented from sending disaster on them. Who would have thought that Paul and Silas would have had any chance of baptizing the jailer who had put them in the inner stocks of the prison cell at Philippi? But that's exactly what God did as they sang and preached the Word while in jail. If you were to start a ministry, how many of you would think that you would go out into the desert and eat locusts and wild honey, and preach for people to repent, for the Messiah had come? That's what John did, and God worked through the message. Even though the early Christian churches had no buildings they could publicly own, they were still the most beautiful churches and some of the most active churches because the Holy Spirit was working in them through the Word.

In the parable, the man didn't have to be a great theologian. **"The kingdom of God is like this: A man scatters seed on the ground, and while he sleeps and rises, night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."** He didn't have to find any magic beans or do any sort of rain dance. He had plenty of seed, so he planted it and let it do what it does. If it grew, he couldn't take pride in it as if he made it grow. If it didn't, he didn't have to blame himself either, as long as he was planting the seed.

Sometimes when I think I have written the worst sermons, people seem to respond and say they got the most out of them. When I try to be too clever, it doesn't work too well. But when I stick with the simple context and meaning of the text, it seems to work just fine. If the church grows, I shouldn't take credit for it. If the people don't come, I shouldn't necessarily blame myself either. If I put forth my effort of preaching law and gospel and expounding on the Word, I have to trust God will do His work. **The ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head.**

What about you? What if you're not growing? What if you feel like you're stagnant? Like you don't feel the Holy Spirit is really working in your life? The first question I would ask is, "Are you in the Word and Sacrament?" Are you studying it? Are you remembering the wonderful promise that God gives you through your baptism and the Lord's Supper? Get back in the Word if you haven't been in it. Pray. Come to Bible study if you haven't been. Stay in the Word and let the Holy Spirit do what He does.

Sometimes people leave church and go to another church because they are all excited about what another church has to offer. But I think to myself, "If you had given half the effort here that you are there, then maybe you would be more excited about what you're getting here." Do they offer a different word? A different sacrament? How is their word better than ours, especially if we are proclaiming God's Word?

Don't measure His work by your emotions and feelings or your growth by your success or lack thereof.

Sometimes growth is hard to see in yourself. Perhaps then stop looking at yourself, and just go back to the Word and trust what God's Word says. When you are in Jesus, continuing to repent and trust in Him, you are alive and growing: maybe in ways that only God knows.

My father in law is a farmer out in western Kansas. He took a risk by buying a plot of land at a pretty high amount of money. But the first thing he did when he bought the land was to install a pivot to make sure that his new plot of land would get enough water. He didn't have to worry about that plot of ground, unless there was a hail storm. Otherwise, he knew it would grow as long as he planted the seed. He would eventually get the harvests in, as long as he kept planting the seed and watering it.

This is why we have invested in a preschool and a child care. As we do these things, we use the Word of God. We teach the children about Jesus. We show them from the Bible how God created the world. We have them sing at church. We trust that the Word of God will work through these ministries, and that they will produce fruit. We trust in the investment of time and money that we put into the education and service we are providing to the community. We don't know how long it will take. We don't know how many people will be brought to faith in Jesus. But we trust that the Word will work at the pace that God wants it to work. Jesus calls on us to be patient and to keep on planting the seed so that the Holy Spirit can do His work.

Think about someone in your life that doesn't have faith, or whose faith is very weak. Perhaps they have moved to a dry and arid land of materialism or entertainment or work, work, and more work. You can't get them to church. Forget about church for a minute. Plant the seed where they are. Make mention of the creation they live in. Talk about the God who gave them life. Ask them if they know about Jesus. Ask them if they know about the Lord's Supper. Ask them if they've been baptized. See what happens. Give the Word a shot. Take the time and effort to plant the seed. Don't worry so much about saying the wrong thing. There's a saying in basketball that goes, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take." Don't be afraid to talk about Jesus. Let the Holy Spirit do his thing. There's no pressure on you. You can't make it grow. But God can.

What happens when the growth occurs? **When the crop is ready, he swings the sickle without delay, because the harvest has come.**" I like the way Jesus concludes this, because it shows us the heart of the harvester. He wants to bring the harvest home quickly. He doesn't delay. He wants it to be ripe. He takes it when it is ripe. Sometimes ripe means different things. When you eat a ripe peach, you don't want it too soggy. But when you use a ripe banana in a cake, you want it to be pretty brown. Sometimes someone might be completely tired and worn out and old, getting kind of soggy, thinking to themselves they should have been harvested a long time ago. But God knows when the perfect time is. He knows when to call people home, and He wants to harvest you home ultimately. He has planted His kingdom in you to bear fruit and do what He wants through you. He knows when to take the harvest, and He won't delay.

That's an important point too, isn't it? God isn't looking for ways that He can catch people into hell. He wants everyone to be saved. He will find a good time to bring you home, when He is ready, not just when you want to go. You're not God. He is, and He knows when to call you home at just the right time. When it is time, He will do it without delay.

I'm not a farmer. But I have a farmer's field in my backyard. There's a harvest growing right now. It's beautiful to see it take root and grow green at this time of year. I'm sure it's even more beautiful for the farmer who planted it and fertilized it. I don't know how smart the farmer is. He might not know the science behind how the plant works or how it is designed. He may not have even graduated from high school. But he sure does know farming and how planting and harvesting works. He may enjoy how green it is right now, but he will enjoy it even more when it is out of the field and harvested.

When it comes to planting the seeds of faith and salvation, Jesus wants us to be simple children and trust that He saves. It isn't rocket science. Paul said it well,

Jews ask for signs, Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified—which is offensive to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 We preach Christ crucified, because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

While the Epicureans were talking about the latest philosophy, Paul was talking about God dying on the cross and rising from the dead. He trusted that the Gospel would work, and it did. There are Christians throughout the world.

Trust that the word of Christ works. When He is proclaimed, people are planted into the church. We take root and we grow. We live and move and have our being in Him. We are watered into salvation through baptism. We grow in Him through the nutrient of His body and blood. We stay alive in Him through the sunshine of God's Word. It is what it is. Trust in His Word to work, and plant the seed of the Word. Enjoy its growth in you and in the world. Be ready for the harvest. Amen.