

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – June 21, 2015

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Mark 4:26-34 (NIV)

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27) Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28) All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29) As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." 30) Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31) It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32) Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." 33) With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34) He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus;

Children love to plant seeds and watch them grow. I remember as a child trying to plant apple seeds and orange seeds in an effort to try to grow an apple or orange tree. I also remember not being successful in those efforts – but as a child that would never deter me from trying again. In fact, just thinking about it makes me wonder if I'd be able to be more successful now if I tried to help my daughter do it, I wonder.

Young and old alike can identify with planting seeds and watching them grow – no doubt, that's the reason that Jesus used the examples of planting seeds and growing seeds to teach about the Kingdom of God. The setting of Jesus' parable is on the shores of the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum where a large crowd of people had gathered.

Many of the Jews of Jesus' day, like many people today, had an interesting misunderstanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God. The people of Jesus day including his disciples connected the Kingdom of God with the Jewish nation or state. They believed that when the Messiah would come that he would restore Israel to a place of prominence among the nations of the world – rivaling the glorious kingdoms of David and Solomon of old.

There are still people today who have a mistaken notion of the relationship between God and the nation of Israel. There are also people today who like to consider other nations or church bodies as having a special relationship with the Lord. The error that ties all of these groups together in a bundle is that God's kingdom is not a visible earthly kingdom. It's a spiritual one. **Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, 21) nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst." (Luke 17:20-21 NIV)**

Our text for today includes some of the many parables in which

Theme: Jesus Teaches Us About the Kingdom of God

1. He says it's like planting seeds
2. He says it's like seeds that grow

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like planting seeds. **"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. How is the Kingdom of God like planting seeds? What is the point of comparison between the two? Jesus said, 27) Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28) All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.**

Jesus compares the mysterious but certain way in which a seed is planted and grows to maturity to way his kingdom is planted and grows to maturity. In the second petition of the Lord's prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy kingdom come." Martin Luther may have had Jesus' words about the kingdom of God being like a man scattering seed on the ground when he explained that petition in this way: **God's kingdom certainly comes by itself even without our prayer but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also.** He continues by answering the question, "How does God's kingdom come?" in this way: **God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word and lead a godly life now on earth and forever in heaven.**

Since the kingdom of God is comprised of believers and since faith comes from hearing the message – we can compare the seed with the Gospel. (Jesus used that same comparison in other parables.) Just as a seed has been given the ability from God to grow and produce a harvest so also the Holy Scriptures have a power from God – the power to make a person wise for salvation. It was this power which emboldened the apostle Paul to be like a man scattering seed on the ground as he boldly proclaimed the Gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus wherever he went. In Romans 1:16 Paul states: **For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.** (NIV)

When we plant seeds we don't really have control over whether or not the seed will grow and mature. In a similar fashion, the one who plants the seed of the Gospel has no control over whether or not it will take root and bear abundant fruit. Many times the companies that sell seeds will guarantee that their seeds will germinate. God's word also comes with a guarantee. The Lord promises in Isaiah 55: 10-11: **As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, 11) so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.** (NIV)

The Word works all by itself to call people to faith and to enable them to grow and mature in their faith just as a seed grows and matures spontaneously. What can those like ourselves, who by God's grace have become plants in the Lord's kingdom learn from Jesus' parable. There are several lessons.

First, we can learn to stand in awe of power of God's word as we see the miracle of the faith which is growing in our own hearts. It is a miracle that we who were born as enemies of God, spiritually blind and spiritually dead – without the desire or the ability to see and serve the Lord – have been given spiritual life through the Gospel. Because of this miracle we are now able to see and believe in the Lord. Now we have not only the desire but also the ability to serve him through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter reminds you: (1 Peter 1:23 NIV) **you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.** For that you have every reason to give thanks to the Lord as you live lives dedicated to giving him glory for his wonderful gift of new life.

Secondly, we are reminded that our task as workers for the Lord's kingdom is to sow the seed – those who are busy planting the Gospel would include pastors, teachers, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and friends. As we scatter the seeds of the Gospel it is important for us not to become caught up in examining the

“bottom line” counting the results as if somehow or another we could determine our effectiveness based on numbers. We are not responsible for the outcome – that is the Lord’s doing. God at his own time and in his own way will provide the growth. The Apostle Paul knew that full well: (1 Corinthians 3:7 NIV) **So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.**

Who of us hasn’t at one time or another admired someone else’s garden or flower bed wishing that ours might be more like theirs – fewer weeds, taller and healthier plants etc. In a similar fashion we may also have stood at a distance so to speak and admired someone else’s faith and Christian life – wishing we were more like them and wondering what was wrong with us – wondering why we have so many weeds of doubt and sin and why we aren’t stronger in our faith. The fact is that it’s often easier to see progress in others as they walk with the Lord than it is to see it in ourselves. Rather than beat ourselves up for our own lack of progress as charted by comparing ourselves to others let us first of all rejoice in the fact that **everyone who believes in [Jesus] has forgiveness of sins through his name.** (Acts 10:43) Jesus himself assures us: (John 6:47 NIV) **I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.** All who believe in the Lord Jesus have forgiveness and eternal life – the seed which has just sprouted and the seed which has reached maturity have an equal place in the Lord’s kingdom.

Our place in the kingdom is not dependant upon the strength of our faith or reaching a certain level of maturity in regard to practicing our faith. Praise God for what the forgiveness and salvation he has given to you.

But what if our praise and thanks appears inadequate to us? What if, when confronted with our sins, our doubts and uncertainties we have a desire to resist those sins and to set them and our doubts and uncertainties aside? Those desires are a fruit of faith. They are an expression of our desire to do what is good (cf. Romans 7:18). It is evidence that in our inner being we delight in God’s law (Romans 7:22). Those struggles are also a reminder that while we are here in this life that we will always be engaged in a battle – but that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus who has rescued us from defeat by defeating sin, Satan and death for us. (cf. Romans 7:24-8:1) Finally, our personal shortcomings are a reminder to turn to the Word with the confidence that the Lord will use it to accomplish his will also in our lives.

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? Jesus questions indicate that he wants his disciples and us to give some thought to his teaching. Jesus has taught that the Kingdom of God is like planting seeds – his kingdom will sprout and grow by itself without our effort. Jesus also teaches us that the kingdom of God is like seeds that grow. 31) It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. 32) Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

When I look around our church property one of the things that amazes me is how tall some of the trees and plants have gotten – many of the pine trees that are on our property were just fingerlings when they were planted. But in 20 years or less they have grown to their present height. Bushes that my wife could easily carry around in her hand are now taller than both of us! And those are plants that grow rather slowly compared to a tree like the Lombardy Poplar that grows six feet or more a year and eventually will grow to be over 100 feet tall.

Jesus expressed a similar amazement when he thought about the mustard trees that grew in Galilee. We might call this plant a bush or a shrub rather than a tree. The point Jesus wants us to keep in mind that it is a garden plant, that it starts out as one of the smallest garden seeds that eventually grows to a height of 10-15 feet tall – large enough to dwarf the other garden plants and to provide a resting place for the birds of the air.

Once again, we'll use a question to start our discussion of this parable. How is the kingdom of God like a mustard seed? The point of comparison seems to be the humble beginnings of the mustard tree and the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God springs up from some rather insignificant beginnings (humanly speaking). When Christ proclaimed the Word, he was rejected and ridiculed by the "important" people of his day. The religious and government officials ultimately had him crucified. This seeming lack of respect and credibility troubled many would be followers of Jesus. Even his own disciples were hoping that Jesus would establish an earthly kingdom following his resurrection as indicated by their question to him shortly before his ascension into heaven: "**Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?**" (Acts 1:6 NIV)

However, none of this ought to bother the student of the Scriptures. Listen to how the OT spoke of the promised Messiah. **A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.** (Isaiah 11:1 NIV) Isaiah tells us that the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon this shoot and that he will provide justice and righteousness to the poor and needy. Later Isaiah continues: **He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3) He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. 4) Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. 5) But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed ... it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. 11) After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.** (Isaiah 53:1-11 NIV)

These verses coupled together with Jesus comments about the mustard seed and other portions of Scripture remind us not to be deceived by our Savior's humble appearances! [**Christ Jesus being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7) rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8) And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death-- even death on a cross! 9) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.** (Philippians 2:6-9)

Contrast the glory and majesty that is Christ's now as ruler over all things with what the disciples and people of Jesus day saw. Compare his humiliation then with the honor and praise he will receive for all eternity from those who rest securely in his shadow and you will begin to understand how the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows.

Jesus wanted his disciples and us to know that the Kingdom of God grows from humble beginnings but will produce an abundant harvest on the last day – a harvest that will endure for all eternity.

Once again, there are some lessons for us to take to heart as we hear Jesus comparing the Kingdom of God to a growing mustard seed. Who would have believed that the child born in Bethlehem's stable would one day rule over all things? Who could have guessed that a handful of disciples preaching the simple message of salvation through Christ would spread a religion to every continent in the world?

Now here is a question for us to ask – who knows what great things God will accomplish through our humble efforts – through the seeds of the Gospel we will plant? As we have seen God's kingdom grows through the power of the word. At times, we may foolishly wish that there was more that we could do to make the

kingdom grow – as if God’s word alone somehow limits potential. Let’s not forget, the Lord Jesus used these tools himself as our text reminds us: **With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them.** Jesus has given us his Word to plant like seed. Plant the seed and watch it grow – being careful not to grow impatient. Share the Word, trusting that the seeds we plant will bear an abundant harvest for the Lord’s kingdom with the Lord’s blessing. Amen.