

Written Copy: Mark 4:26-29 “Spirit Powered Growth”

4th Sunday @ Pentecost: Proper 6

Sunday, June 16th, 2024

Text: Mark 4:26-29

²⁶ And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Exegetical Statement (the text's context)

Jesus has begun to teach using parables, which are stories set in the everyday life situations of the people of His day. He has told a parable about why some come to faith and others do not, which is the parable of the soil, and how the soil that has been worked up is the one that produces the crop planted. In this parable the seed is the Gospel Message, and the soil is the condition of the human heart, which must be worked up by the law. He follows it up with this parable about how that good soil growth happens. It is the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of people. We who are His means to scatter the Gospel seed may not see anything happening. But the Spirit is at work in the hearts and minds of those whose soil He has prepared. The Gospel is like the seed planted that has everything needed to for it to sprout according to the work of the Spirit. We can eventually see the fruits of faith in the lives where the Spirit has planted faith. And when the Father deems that the Christian growth has been completed in this world, He commissions the sickle: the temporal death of the Christian, who waits with Him for the Last Day planting of his glorified body and soul in eternal life.

Focus Statement:

The Gospel Message is the seed by which faith is planted in the hearts of people. The power for it to do so comes from the life, suffering and death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That saving power in the Gospel is planted by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those whose soil He has prepared through the law preached and not preached. In mysterious supernatural ways beyond our understanding, He makes faith blossom and grow, watered and fertilized through the Means of Grace. The Father is the One who decides when the growth is complete and the harvest time comes, both the harvest that is our temporal death, as well as the final harvest of Jesus' Last Day return. On that day He will fashion and form for us glorified bodies and souls that will live with Him in the perfect eternal garden to come.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

When it comes to growing the Church, or to bringing our friends and family to faith, we can take upon ourselves the work that only the Spirit can do. We can become disheartened because those with whom we have tried to share the Gospel seed are not producing any growth in the fruits of the Spirit because He is not working according to our plan and timetable. We sometimes put our faith in the schemes of men, assuming the responsibility of growing the Church when that is the Holy Spirit's work alone.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Make ourselves available to the Means of Grace so that the Spirit can equip us in growth of our faith and to be Gospel spreaders as we go out in our vocations. We share the Gospel with all we meet while looking for those divine appointments where the Spirit has already been at work through the law preached and not preached. We seek in repentant faith to do our part as Gospel spreaders as the Church and individuals, giving over to the Spirit the work of growing the Church.

Subject Sentence: The Holy Spirit plants and grows faith and the Church

Introduction:

How many of you would consider yourselves to have a “Green Thumb”, a natural knack for being able grow flowers and plants and keep them alive? Just the women raise your hands. Now just the men. It used to be back in the days of your fathers and grandfathers that it was the men who farmed and did so for a living. The women were the homemakers. But over the years that statistic has changed. Nowadays, on average, 44% of the women have and keep gardens compared to 56% of the men.

I would fall into that percentile that does not. I have history not of growing plants and flowers but of killing them off. I can’t tell one kind of seed from another. Even when the flowers and plants spring up, I’m almost as incompetent as these guys here from the movie *2nd Hand Lions*. (*Show Movie Clip*)

Now I understand there is an art to planting and caring for a garden. You need to have the right kind of soil, and it needs to be worked up, not hard packed. The seed needs to be planted at the right depth. It needs to be watered and fertilized. And you need patience to wait for it to blossom and grow because that just doesn’t just happen overnight.

But what goes on in the meantime beneath the soil is kind of a mystery. We can read up and know the average growth rate for each kind of plant and flower, but we really can’t know the exact date and time when that seed will grow and sprout enough to break the soil until it happens. Then we can watch it grow and mature until it fully blossoms into the beautiful flower we were hoping for, or until it produces the fruit or vegetable that we desire to serve at our dinner table. It is this mystery of growth that Jesus is addressing in the first parable of our Gospel Lesson

The Parable of the Growing Seed

In this section of the Gospel of Mark Jesus has begun to teach using parables: illustrative stories that are set in the cultural context of His day and age, with people doing things that would’ve been very familiar to His audience. He tells stories about people catching fish, caring for sheep, and here in this parable planting and growing crops. These parables have one or at most two major points that Jesus is trying to teach. Not all of the details are important to this point, some are just window dressing, details given to set the stage in the mind’s eye of the hearers.

Many of these Jesus begins with the words “The kingdom of God is like...” as do the two parables that make up today’s Gospel Lesson. When we hear that phrase “Kingdom of God”, a good way for us to think about this is to replace the word “kingdom” with “reign and rule”. So, these parables are illustrations that help us understand how God is reigning and ruling among us today. And Jesus is the One who came preaching that the “kingdom of God is at hand”, meaning the reign and rule of God comes among us through the work and testimony of Jesus Christ.

Just before this Mark presents the Parable of the Sower. In that one you have a farmer casting his seeds of wheat liberally and what seems initially somewhat carelessly as he casts seed onto soil that will not properly sustain the growth of the plant. But when the seed is planted in the good soil, it produces an amazing yield of wheat. In that parable the seed is the Gospel Message of Jesus Christ, and the good soil is the heart that has been prepared by the Spirit through Law and Gospel to hear and believe in the Word of Christ.

Now in this parable that makes up the first part of our Gospel Lesson we have a man planting seeds. Notice in the parable all the man does is take the seed in his hand and cast it onto the ground. There is no digging down into the soil, dropping the seed into the hole created, and then covering it up. What can we say about this omission? The actions of digging and planting is certainly assumed. But when it comes to planting the Gospel message in the hearts of men, those that are charged to scatter it (or to give witness to it) are not responsible for the planting duties.

You and I, collectively as the Church and individually as members of it are called by Jesus to scatter the Gospel Message as we go out into the world. We just scatter it through our witness in word and action. But we are not responsible for the planting of the Gospel Seed into the hearts of people. That is the work of the Spirit. When we share the Gospel, those in whom faith will grow have already had the soil of their heart worked up by the Spirit working through the “law preached and not preached”. You know what the “law preached” is: that is God’s words that tell all mankind how He expects us to live as His creation, all the “you shall do’s” and the “you shall not do’s”. But what is the “law not preached”? That is all the ways in which the Spirit works through the problems and afflictions of this broken fallen world to show us we are not self-sufficient, and are not capable of handling life on our own, as much as we might like to convince ourselves we are. It’s those problems and tragedies that break our proud “do it myself” heart and force us to turn back to our Creator God who has the power to accomplish all things.

With our proud hearts sufficiently broken the Spirit plants the Gospel Seed. What is that Gospel Seed? It is the account of Jesus' life, suffering and death, and His resurrection for you. It is the story of how God the Son became man and lived the perfect life that you and I cannot by following all God's commands and rules. And then He submitted to what He never deserved or earned, He suffered the punishment of the worst kind of criminal in giving His life on the cross. He did this to become your sacrifice for sin, earning for you forgiveness for all those sins you have committed, commit now, and will commit in the future. And the proof that His suffering and death was sufficient to forgive all your sins is found in His resurrection. That Gospel Seed, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, has the power to create and sustain the faith that you need to make Jesus your atoning sacrifice, and hold fast to that truth no matter what comes.

That Gospel Seed planted in a heart prepared by the Holy Spirit will grow. The Spirit is the powerful agent that makes that growth happen. How does He do that? It is a mystery, just as the growth and sprouting of the seed is a mystery until the plant breaks the soil. But work is certainly being done, growth is happening, even though we can't see it. Just as patience is required of us when we plant the vegetable or fruit seed in the ground, as Christians we need to have patience when we cast the seed of the Gospel into another person's life. This can be especially hard if it is a loved one, whom we are hoping and praying will come to hold fast to the faith in Christ that we hold dear.

Is there something you and I can do to help the Spirit with this work of growth? Yes, there is! We can continue to be His means by talking with them, studying God's word with them, inviting them to join us in worship, sharing fellowship with them, watching for opportunities, windows created by the Spirit whereby your friend/relative asks questions about the Bible and your faith in Christ. And of course we can and should pray for them.

And then, when the blade breaks the ground and begins to grow, rejoice and celebrate with them. Continue to worship and study God's Word with them. And one of the best ways to be a tool of the Spirit in spiritual growth is to live out repentant faith. That means demonstrating how you are honest about your failures and sins by confessing them. That doesn't mean you have to bear all the secrets of your soul. But those ways you openly offend others, especially those ways that you've been a better example of sin than of righteous living. Demonstrate confessing your sins before God, asking His forgiveness, and then holding fast to His words of Absolution that are from Christ Himself. And for those ways you've offend them, ask their forgiveness too, while forgiving them just as Christ has forgiven you.

The Church as the Spirit's Means of Growth

Seems like a big task, doesn't it. It can sometimes seem like it's too much for me personally. When I feel that way my response is similar to how I handle my failure as a gardener: I don't even try. While that might be correct for my planting a garden it is not the answer for those of us who have been called into the reign and rule of Christ, that is His Church. Because it's a big job you and I are not alone. We have each other. We gather as the Church, those of us who have grown and sprouted the fruits of faith along with those with whom the Gospel has been newly planted, as well as those whose soil is being prepped and prepared by the Spirit. As we gather in worship where the means of grace are being repeatedly given through the Word preached and the Sacrament given, the Spirit is at work in you and I to keep the faith alive and growing. And through us He works to plant and sprout that faith in those who join us. It happens not just in this Sanctuary, but as we share Fellowship afterwards.

The Church in worship and in mission is the Spirit's means to accomplish this task. And it is He that grows the Church to be His means, both the Church worldwide and the Church that is Lamb of God here in this place. He has called you here to be an important part of this ministry of Gospel planting. As we worship together and serve together, He equips us to be Gospel seed scatterers who leave the planting and growth of faith into His powerful and capable hands.

We all want to see our Church grow. But that doesn't happen by following the perfect Church growth plan. It doesn't happen by the Pastor going door to door. That might've worked in days gone by, but the Jehovah Witnesses have ruined that for us. It happens as each one of us individually, and together as Lamb of God, go out into the world to serve, using the works of our hands and the witness of our mouth to share the Gospel, and let the Spirit do the rest. It happens as we look for those divine appointments where someone whom we've taken the time to come to know asks questions about what we believe and how we handle the problems of life. In both ways we prayerfully share our faith and reliance on Jesus, knowing the Spirit is the one who can plant that Gospel seed home in their hearts and make it grow.

The Church is the Spirit's tool to equip us to share our faith and provide the means to do this job together. And He is the One who builds up this congregation and equips it so that we can serve as His tool of Gospel proclamation. He calls and brings those people He knows can and will be an important asset for this work. And who are those people? Each one of you are those people. He called you here for His special purpose. And it is to those who have yet to join us that He is calling us to reach out to as spreaders of the Gospel seed. And when we do that, He can and does work the miraculous work of conversion. As we seek to be His faithful tool to spread the Gospel seed, He promises to be faithful to supply the means and the manpower to get that job done according to His plan and purpose.

Conclusion

The Lord Jesus Christ gave the Gospel Message its power through His life, death, and resurrection. He sent the Holy Spirit to plant the message in your hearts and lives where it germinates and grows faith. And as we grow in faith, He empowers us to share that faith wherever we go in our daily lives as individuals and the Church. His purpose may not be to make us into a mega-church. He tailors each congregation to serve and be His means to scatter the Gospel seed to those He has chosen to join us. It's not ours to decide who we share the Gospel with and who we do not, we share it with all whom He places in our path and opens the doors of opportunity to share it with. As we are faithful in this call, He will faithfully equip us to continue to serve Him. He wants us to be His means to prepare all those He has chosen to believe for that final harvest day to come. On that day our broken sinful bodies will be raised from the ground where they have been buried, will be made new, fresh, glorious, and sinlessly perfect. Into them He will plant our purified sinless souls. And we will live together as His Church in the perfect Garden that is eternal life to come. And whenever we fail to be the means He calls us to be, that Gospel Message of forgiveness is the power to restore us and keep us in that faith unto life everlasting. Amen.