

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost 2018.

Mark 4:26-34.

Hymns: 577, 500, 601, 507, 618, 923.

Introit: Psalm 1.

P Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of wicked people,
C **or stand in the path of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers!**
P Rather, his delight is in the Instruction of the LORD,
C **and on His Instruction he meditates day and night.**
P He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which produces its fruit in its season,
C **and has leaves that do not wither. Whatever he does prospers.**
P The ungodly are not like that,
C **but are like the chaff that the wind blows away.**
P Therefore wicked people will not stand in the judgment,
C **or sinners in the assembly of righteous people.**
P For the LORD knows the way of righteous people,
All: **but the way of wicked people will perish.**

Collect: Blessed Lord, since You have caused all of Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. **Amen.**

Old Testament: Ezekiel 17:22-24.

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 5:1-17.

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for the sermon is the Gospel heard before, Mark 4:26-34.

26 Then He said: “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, **27** and should sleep and get up, by night and by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, although he does not know how. **28** All by itself the ground produces grain, first the green blade, then the head, and then the full wheat in the head. **29** As soon as the grain is ready, he puts in the sickle, because harvest has come.”**30** Then He asked, “To what are we to compare the kingdom of God, or with what parable are we to present it? **31** It is like a mustard seed, which, when it is sown on the ground, is a very small seed among all the seeds on earth. **32** Nevertheless, when it is sown, it comes up and becomes the largest of all the garden plants. It produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can make their dwelling under its shade.”

33 He used many parables like these to speak the Word to them, as they were able to hear it. **34** He did not speak to them without using a parable. However, in private He used to explain everything fully to His disciples.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us in your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,
Peace be with you.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard Jesus tell Nicodemus that he could understand the work of the Holy Spirit about as much as he could understand the wind. In today’s Gospel reading, we heard Jesus tell a couple of parables that further illustrate the mysterious nature of the work of the Holy Spirit. The first of these two parables involves seeds growing into a crop.

In spite of the many differences between modern agriculture and the agricultural practices at the time Jesus told these parables, there are some general principles of agriculture that are pretty much the same since the time that Adam's family left the Garden of Eden. For example: once the seed is in the ground, the modern farmer and the ancient farmer pretty much do the same thing. They wait. They go on about their lives and it's up to the seed to grow and produce a yield. Farmers can do many things to make the conditions more favourable for growth, but in the end, it is up to the seed to grow.

Jesus compared the mystery of the Kingdom of God to that mysterious seed - the seed that sprouts and grows while the farmer attends to other things. [Jesus] said, **"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, 27 and should sleep and get up, by night and by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, although he does not know how."**

This parable comes in the context of several agricultural parables. Jesus had just told the "Parable of the Sower" - the parable where seed is scattered on different types of soil - hard-path, rocky, weedy, and well-tilled. But only the well-tilled soil produced a crop.

In that parable, Jesus identified the seed as the Word of God. The well-tilled soil represented the heart where the Word of God sends down deep roots and produces a lasting faith. The other three soils represent hearts that resist the Word of God and lose their faith.

The first parable that we heard today continues to follow this model. The seed is the Word of God. The man who scatters the seed is anyone who proclaims the Word of God - parents telling their children about Jesus - friends confessing their faith to one another - pastors preaching sermons and so on. In this parable, Jesus teaches that we can do many things to make the conditions favourable for growth, but in the end, it is up to the Word of God to produce the growth. Just as the farmer doesn't know how the seed sprouts and grows, so also the one who proclaims the Word of God has no idea how the Holy Spirit will use that proclamation to produce faith.

At first, most Christians are big fans of scattering the seed of the Word of God. We know that God **desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.** [1 Timothy 2:3-4.] As sinners saved by the grace of God, we want to share our salvation. We want everyone to know who Jesus is. We want them to know that He lived a perfect life without sin. We want them to know that He offered Himself up on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the entire world. We want everyone to know that He rose from the dead. We want everyone to believe in this Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. We readily confess our sinful nature to others and then eagerly point to Jesus as the salvation from that sin. This is a good thing.

The challenge comes after we scatter the seed of the Word of God. According to the illustration in Jesus' parable, faith germinates and grows at a pace that is totally out of our control. This characteristic of the growth of the Kingdom of God can be frustrating for the Christian. We want everyone to believe in Jesus and we want them to believe right NOW!

On the other hand, Jesus teaches that the kingdom grows according to God's timetable. His infinite knowledge and perfect wisdom know exactly what is best. The growth of the Kingdom of God depends on Him, not on us. It's as the Lord said through His prophet Isaiah, **"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."** [Isaiah 55:8-9.]

Nevertheless, because we are sinners, we get frustrated with God's timetable and this can cause all kinds of problems. We begin to doubt the power of God's Word. Instead of following the instructions given to us by our gracious giver God, we look to the wisdom of this world. We look to the marketing strategies of advertising agencies instead of the divine guidance of God's Word. We are actually arrogant enough to set up our puny, human impatience as judge over the Word of God. Our arrogance declares the Word of God to be inactive, insufficient, and ineffective and too slow.

Of course the Old, evil foe is more than willing to lay a guilt trip on us for not growing the Kingdom of God. He gleefully accuses us, saying, "You don't go enough. You don't do enough. You don't have that quick little ten second "gotcha" response that brings the unbeliever to his knees in tears pleading for Jesus to

come into his heart.” In his own subtle way, the old evil Devil works to lay the burden for making Christians on Us instead of God. This is one more area where he works to deceive us into relying on ourselves instead of trusting God.

The Old, evil foe also spreads fear among us: *“You don’t know how to proclaim the Gospel. You’re such a poor speaker. You will only mess things up and make them worse.”* So we say nothing. Then we feel guilty about that. It’s a vicious circle.

In the parable we heard today, Jesus illustrated the teaching that it's God who does the work!, and He does His work through His Word. It's as Martin Luther preached: ***“I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. - I let the Word do its work. What do you suppose is Satan’s thought when one tries to do the thing by kicking up a row? He sits back in hell and thinks: Oh, what a fine game the poor fools are up to now! But when we spread the Word alone and let it alone do the work, that distresses him. For it is almighty, and takes captive the hearts ...”***

Jesus gives us the comforting assurance that responsibility for the kingdom’s growth does not rest on our shoulders. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to supervise the scattering of the seed that is the Word of God. Perhaps He will give you the privilege of scattering the Word of God by confessing your faith to your family ... your friends ... your associates. Perhaps He will work in some other way to scatter the Word of God. The point is that the Holy Spirit will see to the scattering of the Word of God, and He will attend to the growth. The growth won't come as the product of our efforts and ingenuity. The Lord of the harvest is in control. Really there’s no need to worry.

Instead Jesus calls us to trust the promise of the scattered seed which is the Word of God. We need the seed of the Word of God to continue to grow its roots deep into our hearts. This is the source of the faith that receives the gifts of God as the Apostle Paul writes, **“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”** [Romans 10:17] He also writes, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ...”** [Romans 1:16] Jesus Himself said, **“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** [John 8:31-32.] It's this seed that the Holy Spirit uses to maintain our faith in our Saviour Jesus Christ who died to save us and rose to give us eternal life.

Just as we trust the Word of God for salvation in us, we also trust it for salvation in others. Just as Jesus told Nicodemus and also illustrated in today’s parable, it's the Holy Spirit that works faith, when and where it pleases HIM. He works faith in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who trust Christ for the forgiveness of sins. This happens not through our own merits, - but for Christ’s sake.

Our old, sinful nature wants to shift the responsibility for salvation back to us and burden us with guilt for not attaining that salvation. This applies not only to our own salvation, but also the salvation of others. Either way, our old sinful nature wants to take us into the pit of despair. Jesus teaches that salvation is never our responsibility in the whole or in any part. It is not our responsibility to save ourselves or to save others. It is the responsibility of the Holy Spirit as Martin Luther explains in the Small Catechism: ***“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.”*** Amen

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

3rd Hymn: 601,

Prayer of the Church 4th Sunday after Pentecost

P Rejoicing in the powerful and fruitful Word of our living Lord, let us pray to our Triune God for ourselves and all people.

Brief Silence

P For the Church in this place and throughout the world, that zeal for our Lord's Word would cause us to always read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest His life-giving truth and faithfully proclaim Christ that many grow with us. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P For us and all Christians, that we may walk by faith and not by sight, trusting our Lord's every promise in Christ; Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P For those in authority, that they may serve with integrity and promote justice for all, including the most vulnerable among us, the weak and the unborn; Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P For our land and those who work it, that God would send favorable weather so that it may bear abundant fruit and all people may receive their daily bread; Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P For the sick (*including* _____), that the Lord would sustain them with His comforting Word, hear their cries, and bless them according to His gracious will, Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P For those who are near death and those who mourn, that even in sorrow they may rejoice in the certain hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P For those who feast on Christ's Body and Blood today, that they may receive Him in repentance, faith, and in a joyous common confession of what is taught here, Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

C Amen.

4th Hymn: 507.