

The Mysterious Word of God
Mark 4:26-34
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 13, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the two parables Jesus places before us, including this phrase: “He [the man] sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This non-festival half of the Church Year with its many, many “Sundays after Pentecost,” is often termed “the season of growth” because the focus is on the Church’s spiritual growth in the Word of God. And, each year, during this non-festival time, we follow one gospel (this year, Mark) through the ministry of Jesus. And that means, whatever progression of thought we notice from Sunday to Sunday is also a progression of thought within Jesus’ teaching.

In last Sunday’s gospel text, Jesus spoke about the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit, that Spirit who works through Word and Sacrament. Today, Jesus speaks of that divine Word the Spirit wields and calls us to meditate on the growth that Word at work brings. Otherwise said, this is “the kingdom of God,” meaning “God actively at work through His Word to bring about the life and glory of His Church.”

Yes, this work of the Holy Spirit happens through the Word. The Word of God is mysterious. To be sure, it is a record of history,

and we ought never consider it a fairytale nor a book of magic incantations. Yet, as this record of history is also God’s Word, it is a divine two-edged sword, powerful not only to remember the dead or teach the living, but to kill and make alive. It can bring mighty King David to his knees in repentance. It can turn Saul into Paul. It can make water a life-giving vehicle. It can make bread and wine to host the body and blood of Christ.

Yet we sinners handle it, disregard it, ignore it as if it is lifeless, powerless, even perhaps “history-less”... only able to give moral advice that we can choose either to apply to daily life or declare irrelevant. We think the Word is useful and ‘on our side’ while all is well, then when life hits a rough patch – illness, poverty, relationships – we think it useless to achieve the Lord’s bidding.

But our couplet of parables for this morning help us meditate on this Word by which God deals with His people and – by these parables – we learn to appreciate that this mysterious Word of God grows God’s kingdom and affords God’s children to dwell safely as birds in the shade of its outstretched branches.

In the first parable, Jesus tells us to think of a man sowing seed in the field. The focus of the parable is *not* the man – we need not wonder if it is **Christ** (if it were, how would he *not* know how the seed works?) **nor** wonder if it is **preachers of the Word** (if them, yes, they *certainly* faithfully go about their days not knowing how the Word does its marvelous work, but pastors have no authority to put

in the sickle at the harvest... *they* do not bring about the Last Day). The man's identity is perhaps intentionally obscure, for this parable is focused on what happens to the *seed*... that seed being the Word of God.

And what *does* happen to that seed... it grows crop that produces fruit – no one seems to know how. Consider: how is it that we – with all of our various stories, all of our various problems, our various backgrounds and levels of education and degrees, living in a world that detests and despises and denies the veracity of this Word – how is it that we all have come to trust that this oft-maligned Word is God's Word to us – the parable says, the observer knows not how. How is it that this obscure Word causes sinners to grow up as grain that bears fruit rather than chaff to be cut down and burned in the fire: the Word brings penitence to the proud, comfort to the sorrowful, peace to the feuding, even faith to the stonehearted as no other well-intended word in all creation can? The parable says, the observer knows not how.

Yet, there's the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. Jesus' parable illustrates notable stages of growth in the life of baptismal faith of each believer. Certainly, we can notice that as well... perhaps from the simple baptismal faith of the infant and toddler to the inquisitive learning of the confirmand or catechumen to the mature faith of (for example) pastors given to quickly and precisely apply pure doctrine to the messy-ness of daily life?

St. Paul uses similar language about this growth of faith, speaking of believers “crav[ing] pure spiritual milk that you might grow up in it”, an image included in Hebrews when the author says, “solid food is for the mature, who by constant practice have the ability to distinguish good from evil.” So, yes, the regular hearing of the Word is to your advantage. No matter how much you say, “I’ve heard this before” or “I know it (in the head)”, the Word is at work for the benefit of faith.

But notice what the end game and goal of the Word’s work is: to bring you to the harvest. This is the glory of God’s kingdom, this is the fullness of God’s reign in Christ Jesus, isn’t it? We seldom see the Gospel this way. We like to think the gospel is about making us happier or giving us a better way of life or making the Church on earth more successful, and we lose focus on the coming harvest and the resurrection. We think of happiness instead of godliness; immediate satisfaction over long-term benefit; best life now instead of eternal life to come. But the purpose of the Word is to prepare us for the harvest, for there at the harvest is where God’s reign and kingdom is seen in its full and completed productivity.

How **patient** God is in tending to you in anticipation of that harvest. You argue and complain with him: “This is not the gospel I had in mind!” And he says, “My ways are not your ways, declares the Lord,” but then he follows up, “I know the plans I have for you, plans not for evil but for good, to give you a future and a hope.” And he

promises to accomplish that through life in His Word: “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth... it shall not return to me void, but shall accomplish that for which I send it.”

And, by this all, God – the master gardener – patiently watches the blade, then the ear, the full grain in the ear, and – just when he knows the time is right (having been so patient in waiting for the faith to be grown in you) he then wastes no time but puts in the sickle. The harvest has come. Eternal life is yours. All that Christ has purchased for you now comes to fruition. He has redeemed you for this inheritance, led you through this treacherous wilderness, and brought you to his goal and purpose for you. And now the harvest comes, and you are safe with him... all because the Word – in a manner unknown to the world – had its way in bringing you to and carrying you through this life of faith to that life in which faith gives way to sight. Jesus speaks of this work of the Word upon sinners saved by grace when He tells Nicodemus: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” What a mystery is this Word of God that gives life to each grain harvested for the kingdom!

Now, if God is at work through this Word to give life to the individual grains, then these individual grains – together – are the harvest of the holy Christian Church. Thus, we do well to consider how the Holy Spirit uses that Holy Word to sow a seed that grows up

into not just each individual believer, but (altogether) the holy Christian Church. This brings us to the parable of the mustard seed, the “smallest” of seeds. The word there to describe such insignificance is *mikroteron*; it’s the same word used to describe “little ones” or “the least of my brothers” or “the least among you.” We understand Jesus’ point – God’s kingdom at work through His Word has such an appearance of insignificant humility before the world.

But then, something mysterious happens; the Word of God does its work so that the heavenly kingdom grows thick and strong and extends out its branches and bears fruit. Our text says, “It grows up and becomes larger than all” – so that out of the seeming humility of the kingdom of God comes its great glory.

How true that is for us in daily life; the Word of God seems so insignificant to deal with our troubles: Covid hits and we flee the Word of Christ to the Word of “experts.” New critical theories of social justice arise and we wonder how the Scriptures are still relevant. New definitions of identity and sexuality and the marriage estate and even new moral codes arise, and we fear that the Word of God once powerful to speak into existence the whole creation is now powerless to defend God’s kingdom from this man-made ‘wisdom.’ We are enticed to dabble with other ‘authoritative words’ that appear more reliable, more trustworthy, “stronger” than the humble appearance of the kingdom of God.

But, as we exhaust ourselves – flailing about in the heat of the day – we weary ones seek respite in the shade and suddenly realize the shade is provided by that once-seemingly insignificant mustard seed of the Lord’s good and holy will. How glorious now stands His kingdom at work in His Holy Word, the only aid and comfort on which we weary ones can depend... our true and only hope in times of trouble. So strong and rooted it stands against the storm, that all the birds of the air hide safely under its branches and even the least and smallest in the kingdom of heaven may dwell secure. Hadn’t Jesus promised in Matthew 6 that the Lord cares for “the birds of the air,” making sure they have a place to nest, and how much more valuable are you to Him than are they? – so that, of your own safety in the kingdom of God, we can sing, “nestling bird nor star in heaven such a refuge e’er was given.”

In fact, where our text says that the birds of the air “make nests in its shade”, the Greek word for that is used in only one place outside of these parables: In Acts 2 (:26), Peter quotes the psalmist, “The [Lord] is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh will also *dwell* (make nest) in hope.”

Now, the question may remain, “How or why can we put such certain hope in this kingdom and its Word?”

Our Old Testament reading informs us. Is it simply a ‘magical Word’ – as if text with its own life or a ‘fourth person’ of the

Godhead – that is as a mustard seed that grows up and creates the glorious kingdom of heaven? Or is it that that Word points us to and attaches us to and puts our hope in a young twig, a tender shoot, that the Lord plants on the mountain heights of Israel?

Jerusalem was built on the mountain heights of Israel, and on one of those mountains was planted Christ Jesus – the *seed* of the woman and the tender shoot from the stump of Jesse. He was planted on that mountain when he went to the cross, even as he explains – “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, I tell you, unless a seed fall to the ground and die (be planted), it remains alone; but if it is planted, it bears much fruit.”

Christ was planted (if you will) in his atoning death, and the gospel of His sacrifice has caused to grow up a kingdom of grace so large that every insignificant “bird” has safety under His branches. He says in the days before his death, “I, when I am lifted up (upon the cross), will draw all people unto myself.” All people of every nation, now matter how insignificant a sinner you are, you may make your nest and dwell in certain hope in the shade of the cross of Christ... the young twig and tender shoot who has become a noble cedar (the Old Testament reading says)

“and under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish.”

Notice that: all the trees of the field bow to the noble cedar who is Christ. He who seemed least significant, the smallest of any hope, He who humbled himself and became a servant and died the death of an insignificant criminal, he now is exalted and his glory revealed (so that at the name of Jesus ever knee shall bow), and he levels the proud and raises up the penitent. And he lives and reigns as the foundation and heart of His Church.

So come, all you who have ears to hear the parable; define all of life's days by dependency upon the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit wields to give life to you and all believers in Christ, with the result that God's kingdom comes, His Word endures, and His Church is firmly rooted against all storms. Come, settle in your nest and dwell securely in the shade of the humble, but mysteriously working, Word of God and the Church that Word has planted to continually grow as the glorious kingdom of God in anticipation of the coming harvest on the day of Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
June 13, 2021