

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

God's Miracle-Grow

Mark 4:28-34

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 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."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.

This morning, I am going to give you some advice about gardening. Those of you who know me well might think that statement is a joke. I'm probably one of the last people who is qualified to give anyone tips on making a garden grow. That's not really my area of expertise. The type of gardening, however, that we will talk about this morning is spiritual gardening. That is something I do know about. I know about it because God has revealed to me and to all of us how spiritual gardening works. In fact, spiritual gardening is one of the topics that Jesus spoke about often while on this earth. We see such a discussion this morning in the two parables that Jesus tells, both having to do with the subject of plants. As we look at the lessons of these parables, we gain some appreciation for "God's miracle-grow."

The first parable that Jesus speaks teaches about *how* things grow in God's spiritual garden. Jesus 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.*" The main point of this parable is based on the fact that the farmer doesn't know how it is that his seed turns into grain. He plants it. But he can't make it grow. That is something the seed does all by itself. This is still true today, isn't it? Even with all of our scientific knowledge of seeds and plants, we still can't say exactly what it is that tells a seed to sprout. We can talk about the proper soil, the right amount of water, the best nutrients possible, etc. But in the end, we don't know exactly what it is that tells that seed, "Grow!" And that is the point that Jesus is making in this parable. God is the one who makes the seed sprout, grow into a plant and produce fruit in his spiritual garden.

It's good for us to keep this truth in mind when working with people and sharing God's Word with them. We know what the "seed" is that is planted in God's kingdom. The seed is the Word of God. The Word of God has the power to grow faith in people's hearts and produce fruits of faith in people's lives. It does this with its simple but powerful message of law and gospel. The Word shows sinners their true sinfulness and then shows them their Savior Jesus who died to take away that sin and give them eternal life. This is an amazing seed that God has given us. But we must remember that we are not the ones who cause it to do its work. That is God's business. He is the one that makes the Word take root in people's hearts and change people's lives.

Keeping this truth in mind guards us against two possible pitfalls. The one is that we become filled with pride when we see the Word doing its work. We think it is our own accomplishment. We share the Word with someone, they come to faith in Jesus and we think to ourselves, "I must be a great Christian. I got that person to start coming to church." Or we share words of encouragement from the Scriptures with a friend, they are comforted, and we think, "I must be a great Christian. I just helped my friend out in his time of need." In both these cases, the miracle is a result of God's Word doing its work. It's not about us and our great skill at presenting that Word. The other possible pitfall out there is one of despair when the Word doesn't work in the way we want it to. We share the gospel with someone, they reject it, and we think, "I must have said something wrong. I'm not a very good Christian. I can't get that person to believe like I do." In such a case, we need to remember that the Word is still working. It just might not be producing the results we had in mind. Ultimately, however, God is the one responsible for those results.

When we realize the truth of this parable, we can have contentment as we share the Word of God with others. We know that it is not up to us to produce the results. Our job is simply to sow the seed. Our job is to speak the truth of God's Word in love to any and all who will hear it. As we do this, "God's miracle-grow" will be at work. His Spirit will produce results. And we will be able to witness miracles. That's truly what it is when God's Word produces fruit in people's lives. It is a miracle. And it is to God's glory when it happens.

The second parable that Jesus spoke tells us about those results. Jesus 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 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.*" As with all of his parables, Jesus used an illustration that would have been very accessible to his original audience. They were familiar with the mustard plant. They knew how small its seeds were. They also knew how large of a plant could result from one of those small seeds. We might not be quite as familiar with the mustard plant, but I think we can still get the point rather easily. Just as a tiny mustard seed can become something greater than you might expect, the kingdom of God grows from something small to something very large. God produces this tremendous growth.

It's good for us to keep this truth in mind also as we minister to others and share the Word with them. Not only do we need to remember that God is the one who produce the results, we also need to remember that he *will* produce results. And they will be great. We should share the Word with the full expectation that God will grow his kingdom. We can see this growth in a number of different ways. We certainly see it when we look at the big picture. How many followers of Christ were there on the morning of Pentecost? 120. How many followers of Christ are there today? 2 billion. That is tremendous growth. We can also look at how God grows his church on a local level—congregation by congregation. Sometimes the growth that God works might not be something that can be measured with numbers. His Word also produces spiritual growth within his followers—a stronger faith, deeper spiritual insight, and a more godly life. This is also tremendous and miraculous growth.

I think we need to keep this parable in mind as we think about our congregation and have an expectation that this church will grow. We can't forget the first parable. If this church grows, it will be entirely God's working. But I think that we can expect that God's Word will produce growth. That is perhaps one of the spiritual reasons for us to build a new chapel. When we make room for more people in the seats, we have an expectation that those seats will be filled. Building a larger sanctuary says that we believe God can grow this church larger than it presently is. This isn't blind faith. God says that his Word will produce results. We can't tell when and how to produce those results, but we can look forward to witnessing these miracles when it does happen.

The great joy of gardening is seeing the results of those labors. It takes a lot of hard work. But the beautiful flowers or tasty fruits and vegetables can make it very satisfying work. The same is true with our work in God's spiritual garden. Planting the seed—sharing the gospel—is not always easy work; but seeing the great things that God does when that seed is planted makes for a rewarding and fulfilling ministry. May God bless his Word among us with tremendous growth and may he make us into a beautiful garden for his glory. **Amen.**

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