

Prayer of the Day:

O God, protector of all the faithful, you alone make strong; you alone make holy. Show us your mercy and forgive our sins day by day. Guide us through our earthly lives that we do not lose the things you have prepared for us in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Verse of the Day: Alleluia. May your priests be clothed with righteousness; may your saints sing for joy. Alleluia. (Psalm 132:9)

Sermon:

He sat alone in the church. It was Monday morning. The church was quiet, very quiet. Things weren't going well. It wasn't growing, wasn't really even staying put, honestly it seemed like it was shrinking. Sitting alone in the sanctuary the pastor began to wonder why. Oh, there were the regular old excuses: summer slumps, the expected ebb and flow

of membership, community down-turns, even some not so usual excuses pandemic made it hard to do anything, outreach especially. But Satan wouldn't leave him be. Perhaps the congregation wasn't enough, perhaps he wasn't enough. Maybe they weren't current enough. Maybe the website wasn't reaching the target audience. Was it possible that the old organ wasn't filling the congregation with the life it had years ago. As he sat contemplating all the things that others were doing, he began to flip through the hymnal, perhaps it was "old music" that didn't bring people in and then the hymn verse grabbed his attention, "*On what has now been sown your blessing, Lord, bestow; The power is yours alone to make it spring and grow. O Lord, in grace, the harvest raise and you alone shall have the praise.*" The words kinda slapped him across the face and brought him back to reality. The kingdom of God isn't grown by our power and strength but by Someone else's nor is growth always measured in numbers, programs and the like. Rather God grows His Church, His kingdom when and where He pleases using the means He has promised.

Jesus himself teaches this lesson in the words of our Gospel Lesson today. As He speaks of seeds and such, He teaches that **Kingdom Work Is a Matter of Faith**. Faith that God's Word is working. Faith that God's Church is growing. And all as He does the heavy lifting.

The first parable notes the mystery that is the growth cycle of a plant from seed to harvest. No, it's not as long as the parable of the Sower and the Seed which Mark has just previously unleashed, but that's because it isn't discussing the varying soils and the rejection of the seed in the world around us. Things get complicated when man gets involved; sin has a way of doing that. Instead, this parable focuses us in on the divine mystery that is the working of the Word and, as we'll see, that means it's all about the work of God. *Jesus also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*

Let's pick this apart for a minute. The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of Grace. It is in this Kingdom that we speak of Christ Jesus ruling in our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit who works mightily in the Word. So, Jesus says it is like this. That Word is scattered like seed (think sharing Jesus with others) and then like seed it does its thing. Notice that there is no work or effort given anymore by the sower of the seed once it is cast. Night and day he gets up and goes to bed ultimately how that seed does its thing is unknown. Sure agriculturally speaking, science can tell us much about the process, even instruct us what the plant needs and when to yield the best possible harvest, but a good drought is all it takes to mind us that this is simply science observing what God makes happen not making it happen anymore than you or I do. Soon that little seed even produces fruit, a harvest which is cultivated

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶ 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.

when ready. The harvest is when you or I should enter into the kingdom of Glory, heaven – the long awaited home of every Christian.

Good! We've pulled it all apart but what does this mean? Well, remember our preacher? It shuts Satan's mouth! Have you ever drummed up the courage to tell someone about Jesus only to have the seed fall on soils drenched in the round-up of unbelief. Have you ever thought to yourself, "If only I was a better communicator, then surely I would have won that soul over for Jesus." How about this one, "I'm not smart enough, eloquent enough, good enough to talk to others about what I believe." Well, that's Satan talking, trying with all of his might to make us believe that our power, intellect or insight has something to do with the working of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace. *Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.*

Now careful here! Jesus isn't saying you should just throw out the Bible, never study it because God will just take care of it all. He wants us in the Word, regulars with His faith growing Means of Grace (the Word, spoken and given in the sacraments: Baptism & Lord's Supper). He wants this because He works to grow His Kingdom of Grace through His means of Grace. But the reality here is very simple, no one is more worthy than another to receive the Word, my personality doesn't make the Word more effective, my knowledge, gifts or personal resume add nothing to the Word. I am a sinner! That fact alone makes me wretched soil in which to plant a seed and while I don't understand how God has done it, He has made me a believer. Through this powerful Word, God points me again to the cross where Jesus triumphs over sin and Satan, destroying the weeds the world, removing the rocks of unbelief and perfectly preparing the soil of heart and minds that the seed may sprout and grow. If He does it for me, He can do it for anyone. He can work in anyone that the harvest may grow.

That brings us to the mustard. This seed was the smallest sown by first century Palestinian farmers. *Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. 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."*

Time to pull this apart again. Small usually means unimpressive, even insignificant. How many bugs have you hit with your car? Do you even care? How many other cars have you hit with your car? Now that usually matters, if not you then to your insurance company for sure.

Still this tiny little seed is significant says Jesus. When planted, and when God goes to work on this little miracle of His, it grows and becomes one of the largest of the garden plants. Google tells me that the black mustard seed, common in Palestine, begins as a 1mm seed which when planted grows into a dense bush which can tower up to nine feet tall. Not only is it producing other seeds (fruit as discussed in the previous parable) but this little seed can now house the birds of the air, as they look for suitable nesting grounds within it.

What does this all mean? Well I hate to burst the bubble, but we are a part of the picture when we think of the tiny, insignificant seed – at least as the world sees it. How well is the Word received in the world today? How about the people of the Word? Is our news media portraying people of faith as pillars of the community and towers of wisdom to be listened to? Not so much right? We fall into the "small" category in the world around us right along with the miraculous Word of God. Admittedly, sometimes it makes me want to pack it in and give it up.

But what does God say? Well you are small! At least by nature (that's sin again) but the Word does a remarkable thing! It points me to one who was significant. It points me to Christ, and His perfect life lived for me, His innocent death died that I might live. And again, though I don't understand how, through I know I don't deserve it, the seed of the Word begins to grow faith in the hearts of the God's people, His church. As faith makes me a regular in Word and sacrament, God continues to work in our hearts and minds. Eventually even the birds of the air which flit and float from place to place stop and take notice of the plant, solid, stable, rooted and grounded it presents a place to rest from the storms of life, maybe even a place for a nest and a family. God has a way of using us, no matter how insignificant we might think we are, for the benefit of others and to the glory of His name.

As you tend the garden this week, stop to think about the one who made the seed and who ultimately grows the plant. There He gave us all a picture of His Kingdom of Grace, and the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word. As you dwell on that, don't be afraid to crack open that book and maybe read over all the parables of Mark chapter 4 once again. It'll be worth your time to ponder everything written there. It'll be worth the time of those who flutter in the air around you. Ah yes, God grows His Church, His kingdom when and where He pleases using the means He has promised. It turns out that **Kingdom Work Is a Matter of Faith**. Faith that God's Word is working. Faith that God's Church is growing. It is even when the Devil, the world and our own sinful flesh might say something else. Amen.