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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6B)

June 14, 2015

Text: Mark 4:26–34

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

Parables serve a remarkable purpose in Christ's Church. Paradoxically, they reveal and conceal the truths of God's kingdom. Parables are those teaching illustrations drawn from common, everyday life circumstances in which the Lord Jesus describes and expounds upon the nature of His Father eternal kingdom. Through parables, Jesus reveals and conceals the truth of God's kingdom. The Lord Jesus says this Himself about parables in the verses prior to today's gospel reading. Listen to Mark 4:10–12:

¹⁰And when [Jesus] was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹²so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."

To believers, those who are filled with the Holy Spirit, baptized into Christ, and are united to Jesus as branches are to a vine, parables provide a means for continual growth in knowledge and understanding. They are simple and profound. You can never truly exhaust them. That's why Christians struggle with them at times. They do reveal God's kingdom but that revelation comes through prayer, continuing maturity in the faith, and most especially in the school of hard knocks. So, if you've struggled with understanding our Lord's parables, you're not alone. Nor should you be discouraged. You will always be growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. And parables are one His gifts to accomplish that gracious work.

For unbelievers, however, parables actually conceal the truths of God's kingdom. How do they do that? For one, their simplicity is a barrier. Natural human reason seems to expect and demand that transcendent things be difficult or obscure. It appeals to our pride. For another, all spiritual things remain hidden without the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Unbelievers, by definition, are not temples of the Holy Spirit and so cannot receive the spiritual things of God even as they are revealed in the simple profundity of Christ's parables.

So what are we, God's baptized, Spirit-filled people, to learn from the two parables in today's gospel reading? There's nothing particularly hard to understand about these two parables. A man planting seeds in the ground is simple enough. The growth of an ordinary tree, a mustard tree, is rather common and mundane. But how these relate and inform our understanding of God's kingdom is the question.

Each parable emphasizes one particular aspect of the Father's eternal kingdom. First, the parable of man scattering seed teaches us that God's kingdom grows by itself with little real effort on our part; all this to our astonishment. Second, the parable of mustard seed demonstrates that the Kingdom starts small and looks rather unimpressive but eventually grows into a magnificent, glorious Kingdom that fills the universe. For a few moments, we'll look at each truth Jesus is teaching us in these two parables.

First, according to Jesus, "the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how" (vs. 26–27). The main point of Jesus' parable is that God's kingdom grows by itself with little real effort on our part. It's like a seed. You plant it in the ground and it grows; the seed does all the work.

To our modern sensibility, such a description of how seeds and plants grow is too simplistic, too infantile. We know a great deal about how seeds sprout and grow. In addition, we know there a ton of work to be done after the seed is planted. The ground must be watered, weeded, fertilized, etc. This is one way how the unbelieving mind is offended at Jesus' teaching. It's not scientifically sophisticated enough so it's dismissed as primitive superstition or gibberish.

Jesus isn't teaching a horticultural lesson nor is he professor at an agricultural college. He's the Lord of the Church teaching His people about life in His kingdom. And the profound truth is that God's kingdom grows abundantly and fruitfully most often to our complete wonder and amazement with little real understanding as to how it all works. The growth of God's kingdom is unpredictable. Its growth pattern is largely a mystery to be observed and rejoiced in, not controlled or manipulated by our tampering.

To begin with, the people who appear to be the least likely to believe the Gospel are often the ones who hold to it most tenaciously. Conversely, people who seem to be the most apt to embrace Jesus' gracious salvation are those who resist it the most

ardently. We must never think that we can determine which person or types of persons are more apt to receive the promises of the Gospel. That's one of the problems with many evangelism programs and strategies. They too often use business-like models that target a particular audience or segment of society who demonstrate specific tendencies and tastes.

Right now there's a good deal of attention being given to the so-called millennials, the generation born between the 1980's to the mid 2000's. They represent the largest segment of American society, even larger than the baby-boomers. They are racially diverse, technologically savvy, environmentally conscience, spiritually minded but by in large not attending church or any form of organized religion. Consequently, all kinds of articles and books are being written for church leaders intended to help them reach out to this intriguing age-group.

But Jesus would teach us something quite simple and powerful: plant the seeds of My Gospel truth in the lives of all people – baby boomers, Generation X, Millennials, all people – and the seed will do the work. Be faithful with the seed. But it will grow on its own as the Holy Spirit brings the forth the growth and increase.

This is the message that Jesus is trying to teach us. God's kingdom "certainly comes by itself without our prayer," our works or our fretting. We are free from trying to figure out the when's, where's and how's of God's kingdom. An over preoccupation with such things reflects that we want to be in control of God's kingdom; we want the Kingdom to come on our terms. But such is never the case. God's kingdom grows according to His plan and purpose. And that is very good news. For His ways are higher than our ways; His grace and love are far greater than ours.

Our prayer and earnest expectation is that the Kingdom "may come to us also." We may not know all the in's and out's of God's kingdom but Jesus says he wants to give it to us; so much so that He bore our pains, sorrows, and even our death on His cross. His precious blood and victorious resurrection are His guarantee that it will come to those who believe and trust in His promise.

As Christians and as a congregation, we are given the task of planting the seed through preaching and teaching the Gospel here and in our homes and vocations as well as by the faithful administration of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. And we are to do so abundantly, graciously, maybe even a little recklessly

without any preconceived ideas of the potential growth. The growth and increase is left up to God alone.

The second parable about the mustard seed teaches us that God's kingdom begins small and unimpressive but grows into a magnificent kingdom that fills heaven and earth. The small and unimpressive seeds of the Gospel are planted in a world that resists the coming of God's Kingdom. But it grows nonetheless; slowly, imperceptively at time. Jesus says His kingdom becomes like a mustard tree that puts out large branches so that birds can make nests in its shade. We are those birds making our home in God's kingdom.

In light of the many changes taking place in our country and in other historically Christian countries (Canada, the European countries, etc), many Christians are fearful that the Church will diminish or collapse altogether in the decades to come. These parables remind us about the true nature of God's kingdom. We aren't in control and the particulars. Jesus is. And He promises that it will continue to grow until it reaches its full maturity. Those are the promises of the Lord Jesus.

In some ways, I believe we ought to be more optimistic than ever, more joyful and expectant. The seeds of Christ's gospel have been planted in this area for a long time. They will continue to grow. Our Lord's kingdom is here among us. Here, in this place, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life are offered to all who would become like the birds making nests in the mustard tree. The simple words of Christ's kingdom have the power to raise the dead, to liberate captives, to forgive sinners, to give joy and peace instead of sadness and turmoil.

These are the things revealed about Christ's kingdom in the parables of the scattered seeds and of the mustard tree. God's kingdom grows with little effort on our part. Its growth and increase fills the heavens. And by God's grace and love, we are brought into that glorious kingdom.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.