

4th Sunday after Pentecost
June 16, 2024
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Mark 4:26-34

Mark 4:26-34 (EHV)

²⁶He said, “The kingdom of God is like this: A man scatters seed on the ground, ²⁷and while he sleeps and rises, night and day the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸The ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹When the crop is ready, he swings the sickle without delay, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰Then he said, “To what should we compare the kingdom of God? Or with what parable may we picture it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is one of the smallest of all the seeds planted in the ground. ³²Yet when it is planted, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the sky can nest under its shade.”

³³With many similar parables he continued to speak the word to them, as much as they were able to hear. ³⁴He did not speak to them without a parable. But when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Jesus again tells us some truths about the kingdom of God that we could not know on our own. These truths had to be revealed from the top down, from Jesus to us. Jesus wants us to know and trust these truths about the kingdom of God so that we do not waste our efforts on methods that do not work in God’s kingdom. Instead, we trust and use the seed that our God has given to grow his kingdom. Hear the first parable of Christ before us this morning one more time:

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As much as we know today about seeds and agriculture, we still can’t force a seed to grow. We can give it just the right soil conditions, temperature, light, and water and yet not every seed will sprout and grow. Either the seed grows, or it doesn’t. The power is in the seed.

The seed in the parable is the Word of God in God’s kingdom, specifically the gospel in the Word. Only the gospel in the Word of God has the power to sprout faith in the heart of an unbeliever. Only the gospel in the Word of God has the power to grow the faith of a believer. Only the gospel has the power to motivate a believer to change their sinful ways.

But sometimes we as individual believers and as congregations lose patience with the seed of God’s Word. We want faster results. We want more people in our congregations, and now. We want to see people’s lives change immediately. The Word of God doesn’t seem to be working, at least not fast enough, so we are going to try something else. Maybe we need a hybrid seed.

Certainly, we are blessed with actual hybrid seeds that allow farmers to grow more food in more conditions in more places in this world to feed more and more people. But in the kingdom of God, a hybrid seed is a terrible idea. For what can we cross with the Word of God to improve on the Word of God? Some have tried to add psychological manipulation to God’s Word. During the so called “Great Awakenings” in this country, many used this method to get people to decide to believe in Christ. They whipped people into an emotional state with certain songs, often sung

over and over again. I've been in a service where the pastor asked people to raise their hands if they decided that day to give their lives to Jesus and several who were already believers raised their hands. It was peer pressure to make it easier for others to raise their hands. The Word of God was not enough. You have to add a little peer pressure and get people in the correct emotional state before the gospel can sprout faith in someone's heart.

While this is not a big temptation for us as Lutherans, we can start to slip into the thinking that we have to make God's Word appealing to others. We have to make the worship service fun for people to attend. If we just had the right music, the pews would be filled with believers. If we just add this to the Word of God, then the seed of God's Word will work. Foolishness. God's Word does not need our improvements.

On the other hand, we must not try to change the Word to make everyone happy with it. The sinful nature in every human is offended by God's Word in some way and there is a temptation to avoid those topics which might offend someone. The Word of God clearly teaches us that the desires and actions celebrated in the month called "pride" in our communities are sinful. We must not ignore the parts of God's Word that label these attitudes and actions as sin in order to gain more members. In the same way, we would be leaving out part of God's Word if we did not also remind ourselves that being proud that I am not like those sinners celebrating pride month is also sin. Pride in sin or pride in perceived avoidance of sin is still sinful pride because it is focused on self and not trusting in God and his Word.

Therefore, we must not try to remove the impurities in the seed. There are no impurities in God's Word. We must not try to improve upon the Word of God. Any additions will be impurities. Our job is simply to sow the seed. We do not ask how we can increase the yield of the seed so that more people join our church. We sow the seed. In our families and communities and in our congregations, we should ask this question. How can we get more of God's Word to more people, more often? And then we trust God to make his Word sprout and grow. Jesus promises tremendous growth from what seems like an insignificant seed.

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God's plans start so small in the eyes of the world. He starts with two humans, Adam and Eve, to fill the world. He starts again with eight believers after the flood, Noah and his family. He chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be his people who carry the promise of the world's salvation. And when the Savior of the world arrives, when God's Son arrives, he is born of a poor, virgin girl in a little town of Bethlehem. She is pledged to be married to an unknown carpenter. God's Son is raised in a backwater town of Nazareth. Is any of this the way to start a kingdom to rule over all other kingdoms? Only according to God's wisdom.

The rulers at the time of Christ laughed at Jesus being a king. When Jesus won't perform miracles for Herod, the king has him mocked and sends him back to Pilate. After clothing him in a purple robe and smashing a crown of thorns into his head, Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd and says in mockery, "Behold the man!" (John 19:5). To these earthly rulers and to many in our world, Jesus seems so insignificant, so weak, so small that nothing will be accomplished through such a little seed.

Then he suffered and died to pay for the sin of the world. Then he rose again. All the time, the kings of the world opposed him. When the disciples started to spread the good news about Jesus the Christ, the gospel, the rulers tried to stop them. Many were killed for talking about Jesus. The

seed of the gospel continued to grow and more and more believed in Christ. The Jewish leaders and Roman rulers tried to snuff out the believer again and again, but the gospel seed grew and grew. Believer would not stop believing that the Son of God lived, died and rose again for their salvation. They would rather flee their homes than deny Christ. They would rather face execution than deny Christ. And as these believers planted the tiny seed of the gospel, the little seed sprouted faith in the hearts of more and more people. While the Roman Empire crumbled, the kingdom of God grew through the little seed of the gospel so much so that there are believers all over the world.

We are blessed to see Jesus' parable of the mustard seed happen as the kingdom of God has grown. But we still must battle the temptation to see the seed as tiny and in need of our assistance. For the gospel still looks insignificant today. How is telling someone that Jesus is God's Son who died and rose again going to do anything for that person? These are just words on a page or on a screen or spoken, just words. Yes, but the gospel is God's power for salvation. The seed is powerful. And how will a little water applied to someone in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit do anything for that person? Because baptism is the gospel too. It is God's promise to cleanse from sin, give faith, and save the one who is baptized. How can eating a tiny piece of bread and drinking a tiny bit of wine do anything? Because it is the gospel when connected with Christ's promise that this sacrament is his body and blood, given and poured out for the forgiveness of sins. The kingdom of God grows when the Word of God is proclaimed, and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution.

We pray for God's kingdom to come whenever we use the Lord's Prayer. As a reminder of what we are praying for in this petition, turn in your hymnals to page 289 and recite with me the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer.

Trust the seed of God's Word to accomplish God's will. Sow the seed of God's Word and do not try to improve upon it. Follow the seed of God's Word as you give thanks to the Lord for bringing you into his kingdom by your life of love for God.

Amen.