

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. (Mark 4:26-34)

The Gospel Works!

Ten years ago, I bought a Ford Taurus and on the whole, it's been a pretty good car. Of course, like most cars today, it has power windows. When I bought it, a friend of mine said, "Those are great, but if they break, they're really expensive to fix." Of course, you know what happened. The motor on the driver's side window broke. So now, every time I go to a hospital, when I get to the parking garage, I have to pull forward past the machine that gives the parking stub and open the door and reach backward and pull the ticket out. Forget about drive-throughs. I avoid them like the plague. Power windows are so cool. But in the case of my car, they haven't worked out nearly as well as an old fashioned crank would've. What works? So often in life, that's the key question. That's true in the church, too. I get ecclesiastical junk mail all the time from companies that promise to increase our offerings and our attendance and who knows what else. I'm sure those companies believe in their products. But what really works in the church? Our goal is not to collect the most money or to fill the pews faster than anybody else does. Our goal is to create faith in the hearts of unbelievers. Our goal is to nurture the faith of believers. What makes that happen? Jesus gives us the answer in the two little parables that he told in our gospel lesson for today: **The gospel works!**

I.

In the first parable a man scatters seed on the ground – that's the way they planted in Jesus' day. And Jesus says, "**Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.**" He goes on to describe the development of a wheat plant from a sprout to the harvest. Every year my wife puts in a garden and I see Jesus' parable illustrated. Just a couple of weeks ago, my wife carefully dug four furrows and she planted beans in all four. Then she covered the seeds with dirt and she watered them and for a couple of weeks, nothing seemed to be happening. But if you go out into our back yard today, you'll see that those beans and quite a few other plants are coming up.

Night and day, they grow, even though we don't know how. Now, I'm sure that biologists do know why seeds sprout and how it happens. But going back to my wife's bean plants, she planted the seeds pretty evenly. I rototilled the whole garden before she started. We fertilize and we water it all the same. Yet, in those four rows, there are spaces where there are no plants at all. Why did some seeds come up and others fail? Why will some of those plants out-produce others? Even in this scientific age, when you look out at your own vegetable garden, you may not be able to answer all those questions.

The purpose of this parable is not to answer those questions. Rather, Jesus pointed to something that everyone can see to make a deeper spiritual point. The seed represents the gospel. God plants that seed on the soil of the human heart. That seed works. You and I can't see how or why, but faith is born. Day and night, that faith grows. It starts on the day we baptize our children. As we bring them to church and to Sunday school and to our Lutheran elementary school and they hear how much Jesus has done for them and how much he promises them, that faith grows and matures. Now, that doesn't mean that we can always see it. When we have visitors in church and they hear the good news, I don't often see lightning bolts hitting them from heaven and giving them faith. And they may not even realize on the day they were here what happened to them. They may never come back and tell us that now they believe. But the Holy Spirit plants the seed and he causes it to spring up and faith lives in their hearts.

God does that individual by individual. Each plant develops and produces fruit. But the cumulative effect is unmistakable: the Church reaches out. It preaches and teaches and acts in love. And when the crop is finished, when all those believers that God planned for have come to faith, the Lord will return and the harvest will begin. You and I are a part of that crop. The gospel was planted inside us and it is changing us. Every time we come here is a fruit of faith. Every act of love that we share with each other is a fruit of faith. Every offering of time and talent and treasure to spread that seed is a fruit that God causes to grow in our hearts until Judgment Day. So the practical question is this: what should we be doing to spread that seed? What works? What should we be doing so that more and more people come to faith? What should we be doing so that the children in our congregation grow up in the faith? What should we be doing so that we adults continue to grow and produce fruits of faith?

The answer is really quite simple: proclaim the gospel. That's the whole point of what Jesus is saying here. The gospel is the power of God. He works when we scatter that seed. He causes new Christians to come to faith. And he causes believers to grow up in the faith and to produce fruits, lives that give glory to him. All we have to do is proclaim that gospel. Now, that doesn't mean that there's no room for creativity or planning. Obviously, not every congregation has a Lutheran elementary school. We choose to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in operating a school so that we have this environment to preach the gospel. We wouldn't have to do it that way, but we are free to. We have chosen to do the same thing with HVL. We have chosen to support a mission in downtown Detroit that uses English as a Second Language to bring people in so that they can hear the gospel. In other situations, we might choose to do something else. But whatever approach we use, the end all and be all of our work remains the same: proclaiming what Jesus did for you and for me.

To make our church all about the gospel requires one thing: trust in that gospel. When we lived in Muskegon, a member of the church there had a little boat and he used to take me fishing. He was always bugging me to go out with him onto Lake Michigan to fish there. But I just didn't trust his little boat enough to take it out onto the big lake. Do we trust the gospel to do the work that God has given us to do? Or do we think it's too small a boat for a big lake? There's a fine line between trying to be creative in our efforts to bring people in and thinking that livening this service up a bit will cause this church to grow. It is my job as your pastor to apply the word of God to your life. And I hope that I succeed once in a while in making it interesting because it's my job to get your mind and your heart involved. But it's my job to get them involved in what God promises you through the work Jesus did for you. It's not my job to create a personality cult that will evaporate if the Lord sends me somewhere else. It's not my job to get us excited about all kinds of programs and events just so you'll be attached to our church. Our work is to proclaim the good news about Christ.

Do we trust the gospel enough to put all of our eggs in that basket? Do we trust that the kingdom will grow when we proclaim the life and death and resurrection of our Lord? Do we trust the gospel even when we can't understand why things are going wrong for us? Or do we think that we have an idea that will get the job done? It's easy to lose our trust in the promises that God makes with the gospel. Are we guilty of that sin?

All Christians have a sinful nature. We all struggle to trust in what God promises us. But God still loves us. He sent his Son into this world to pay for our failure to always trust in his gospel promise. Jesus died and paid for that sin and for all the unbelief of our sinful nature. He died and paid for all that we are guilty of. And then he rose and God wiped that sin away. And you know what? That's the gospel. That's what we're talking about this morning. That message is what makes our faith grow and produce fruit. And it's what will bring us home to heaven. **The gospel works. It makes faith all by itself.**

II.

Jesus continued to talk about the gospel and what it does for us in the second parable, the parable of the mustard seed. A mustard seed is the smallest seed you're likely to plant. **"Yet,"** Jesus says, **"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."** Now, understand that the mustard the Jews planted on the other side of the world was different from the mustard you and I plant in our herb gardens. If they let it grow, it did become a small tree. Birds did nest in it.

The mustard seed again is the word of God. Just like a mustard seed is so tiny that if you drop it, you'll never find it again, to all outward appearances, the gospel is too small to do much. When we baptize a baby, what did we do? We put water on its head. The pastor said some words. It doesn't even seem all that memorable. When you hear a sermon, you hear this guy up in the front talk on and on and sometimes, it

doesn't seem like he has a clue what your life is like. And it's not unusual for us to stare out the window just waiting for him to be done. Even communion is nothing more than a piece of dry, unleavened bread and a sip of wine. What's the big deal?

The big deal is that God has hidden his power in all those things. In communion, God attached the very body and blood of Christ to that bread and wine. In those long, boring sermons, Christ is proclaimed. That means that the power of the Holy Spirit is there. In holy baptism, the word is joined to the water and makes the water a gracious water of life. God works through the gospel in word and in sacrament and he does amazing things. He takes those simple, powerless looking seeds and he grows them into trees. Don't be fooled by the packaging. The gospel is the most powerful force in your life. It has created the Church. I don't just mean Peace Lutheran Church or even just the Wisconsin Synod. Every believer in Christ is a part of the Church. And that seed created faith in our hearts individually. That faith and that church are the tree Jesus is talking about. Day by day, they grow under God's care. And the birds perch in its shade. Just as those birds find refuge from the blazing Middle Eastern sun, we find refuge in the Christ's work of ruling in the Church and in our faith.

We live in a world in which hardship and difficulty abound. In just a few minutes, we're going to pray for members of our congregation who have lost loved ones, who have suffered terrible health problems, who are in physical danger. We will ask God to protect them. The gospel is his answer to our prayers and to the hardships of this life. He does not promise to take away every pain and loss. People we love die. We ourselves may have horrible health problems. Harm and danger are real here. But in the midst of all of that, we find refuge in the gospel. God promises us that Jesus died and rose for us. And he will not abandon us now that he sent his Son to save us. God gives us the fellowship of the Church to comfort us. Call me when you're sick or in the hospital. I will come and share the gospel with you. I will come as your representative of Jesus and remind you that he will never leave you or forsake you. Call your fellow believers and let them strengthen your faith. And come and hear the gospel. God will grow your faith into a large and protective tree. Take refuge in its shade. All that is God's promise to you. And it will work because God built his power into it. **The gospel works. It makes great things out of what looks like nothing.**

Jesus made that point with two short parables. Why did he use parables? Mark says he taught them in parables "**as much as they could understand**" but he explained everything to his disciples. Parables hide the truth from hearts that are hard. But they open up a wonderful world of understanding to hearts that believe. Jesus wants your faith to grow and so he gave you these parables. Embrace this message of his love and grow in your faith. Amen.