

And So It Grows...

A sermon based on Mark 4:26-34

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have some wonderful news to share with you this morning. Yes, the gospel, but we'll get to that! No, it's this: I was outside watering this past week, and lo and behold, sprouts were coming out of our garden! I know what you're thinking. That's old news. Your plants might already even be producing. Well, we're a bit behind!

But, regardless, you know the excitement and anticipation that goes with gardening. You start out with seeds, plant them, hope that if you can give them the right combination of water, sun, and nutrients, not only will the shoots pop out of the ground, but they'll grow big and strong and produce lots of fresh veggies for you this summer.

But until that shoot comes out, it's a waiting game. They say a watched pot never boils, and I'm certain the same applies to growing plants. It takes patience.

And the same is true of the kingdom of God. I certainly wouldn't be opposed to an explosion of the gospel and the body of believers in our community and in the world ballooning overnight. But that's not usually how God works. But this morning, Jesus encourages us to take heart and have patience. The gospel message, it grows believers. Slow it often grows, but with God in control, so it grows.

You want to talk about an exercise of patience? How about you try listening to teens converse today. If they aren't talking a mile a minute, then just some of the lingo they use...is beyond us. Try this: "Sorry, ctn, bff here rofl at my #wardrobeproblems #h8er *sad face* jk lol tyl. WHAT?!?! By the way, that's text talk for, "Sorry, I can't talk right now, my very best friend is here rolling on the floor laughing at my wardrobe problems. What a hater! I'm so sad. Just kidding. Laugh out loud. Talk to you later."

Maybe that makes it easier, then when we get to Jesus' parables, like the two we have before us today. Maybe it doesn't. Do you ever feel that way when you read some of these kinds of sections of Scripture?

I mean, some of Jesus' parables are easier to understand, like the Good Samaritan showing love and care for his neighbor, just like we should to everyone we meet. Or the parable of the unmerciful servant, who was forgiven a debt of tens of thousands of dollars from his master but then was unwilling to cancel the debt of his friend who maybe owed him a hundred bucks, how also we've been forgiven our massive debt of sin by God and that leads us to willingly and freely forgive those who sin against us.

But then you get to some like these, parables that are especially talking about the kingdom of God and what it's like, and it's easy to get confused and lost in the translation. But this was the way Jesus liked to teach the people, using parables, using everyday items and concepts to convey spiritual and heavenly truths to the people, like using images or objects to teach lessons.

Now, all of the pictures, language he uses might not quite jive with us today, but most of the time, it made sense to the people then. It would be like us talking about mukluks or muktuk or sourdoughs or dipnetting or ice fog with Outsiders today. We get it, but they don't. Same with Jesus' parables.

So, that's our challenge for today. Looking at these two parables, we have to ask ourselves, "What particular aspect of the kingdom of God is Jesus teaching us here today?"

First of all, what's the kingdom of God? We're not talking about heaven here. Rather, this is Christ's rule in our hearts, just like Jesus said in Luke, "The kingdom of God is within you." It's Christ working in us...working through our hearts of faith in him.

Well, what's that like? First, it's like a man planting seed. And what happens to that seed? Night and day, the man sleeps...he's awake, and the seed sprouts, it grows, it produces grain, it turns into a harvest. The kingdom of God is also like a mustard seed, while not technically the smallest seed you could plant, it's still pretty tiny...at least when compared to the plant it produces. A mustard tree can grow to over ten feet tall, and that's a vegetable! That's huge! That's incredible!

So, what are we learning about the kingdom of God from these two parables? One truth from two different aspects, and that's this: the gospel message is powerful and it's reliable. In other words, just as the seed has some mysterious and wonderful power to grow and produce a harvest, so God's Word has a mysterious and wonderful power to grow in the hearts of people and produce a harvest for the Lord, just like in our first parable. At what speed or when? That we can't say for each believer, but if God plants it, he makes it grow and flourish. That much is a guarantee.

The parable of the mustard seed, likewise, focuses on growth, but not just for the individual believer, but for the body of believers. We can see how that parable started to come to fruition in the New Testament, how God's kingdom had small, fairly insignificant beginnings, what with just Jesus, this teacher that many of the significant Jews refused to follow, and his 12 lowly, unimpressive disciples. But we see the explosion after Pentecost, how their numbers grew to great proportions. The small seed to the massive tree.

The truth is, the seed, the gospel will take root and it will grow. Again, at what speed or when? That we can't say for each person, but if God plants it, he makes it grow and flourish. That much is a guarantee.

Are you ok with that? Well, first let me ask you this. Are you the type of person who likes spontaneity or who likes to have things planned out? If your spouse or your good friend were to call you up this afternoon and say, "Pack your bags for a few days. I'll pick you up. We're going on a little trip. It's a surprise," would you be ok with that? Are you the type who will just go along with it, and just throw a little something for every type of vacation spot that you can think of, just in case? Or are you more like me, who can't deal with vague details, but would have to know specifics, like, "Where are we going? How long? Is transportation figured out? Who's going to watch my dog or collect my mail?"

It's a control issue, isn't it? There are people, like me, and maybe like you, who have to have a hand in everything, like things to be planned out to a T, who want to be able to regulate as much as we possibly can.

But, unfortunately, when it comes to the seed of the gospel and it growing and produce of harvest of faith in people, we have no control over that. Are you ok with it? Any of you who are gardeners should. You know that you can do everything for your plants – regulate water-intake, light, temperatures, nutrients, soil, what have you, but you still can't make them grow. That much is out of our hands.

And as frustrating as that can be, multiply it when it comes to the seed of the gospel. And from our hearts of sin, sometimes that frustration of not seeing any growth leads to doubting the power of God's Word to grow, both in us individually and in us universally.

Maybe you've found yourself saying one of these statements before, "If my parents had given me a better example when I was young, being a Christian wouldn't be so hard for me." Or, "If my spouse were more cooperative, it would be easier for me to grow in my faith." Or, "If the Bible were only easier to understand, I would feel better equipped to live each day for Jesus." Sound familiar?

Or how about one of these statements? "If only our congregation were larger and had better facilities, maybe more people would visit us." Or, "If only we had more modern touches, in the worship space, music, activities, maybe then this could be a place where I could invite my friends to." Or "If only I could speak more fluently, maybe I could persuade my neighbor to come to church."

Do you see the harm in those doubts? What would happen if you just gave up on watering your seeds or making sure they had light? What would happen if you never even planted them? We have no control over a seed growing, but we can do things to prevent that from happening. And when we doubt the power of God's Word to grow in us and in others, when we make excuses that prevent us from water that seed of the gospel in us and in others, we're preventing growth from happening. We're stunting the power of the gospel. And friends, that's sin. A sin worthy of God removing all his nurturing care from our lives, allowing us to wither under the heat of sin and temptation, pulled out of the ground, and tossed into the fires of hell.

He should, but he doesn't! Thankfully, we're not in control. Thankfully, the gospel seed's growth is not on us...at all. Listen again to what Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like...a man scatters seed on the ground...The seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain."

All by itself here is maybe not the best translation of the Greek. Better would be "automatically." You see, the earth does not actually produce growth "by itself." Every plan we have owes its growth to the power of God, who both creates and sustains the natural order. Growth in the Kingdom of God, or the growth of the gospel, is similarly the result of God's Word and Spirit, not the speaker or the hearer, not you or me.

And we know, without a doubt, if God is in control...because God is in control, growth is automatically happening through the gospel.

Why can we be sure? Because God loves us. You see, he didn't just create us and let us go on our own. No, while we were still sinners, God sent Jesus to live and die and rise. While we were rotting away in the decay of sin, Jesus took that rot on himself on the cross and by his blood washed us clean. When we were on the verge of death and eternal destruction, Jesus rescued us...because he loves us.

And now, Jesus has given us new life through that gospel message. "From infancy, you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation," the Bible assures us. Now, we know gospel growth occurs because it's exactly what's happening in each of us.

Friends, that's sanctification. God has worked through the gospel, planted in us, to raise us to a new life of faith in him, a faith that is continually growing. Now, we don't always see the progress in our

Christian faith life we would like to see. Sometimes we see such progress in others more easily than we can see it in ourselves. But when we apply ourselves to the Word of God, the growth will come. We have God's promise that it will.

And the same is true on a larger scale, a large field. God's gospel works. God's gospel grows. Sometimes, you get that massive harvest shooting up overnight, like we saw in our first lesson with Jonah and the Ninevites. Or maybe it takes a while to see God working, like when the prophet Elijah was in the cave, thinking he was the only one faithful to God when God had preserved thousands of his own.

Jesus' parables here reassure us that over time the kingdom of God will grow incredibly large, far beyond its unassuming beginnings. Precisely because the Kingdom grows so slowly and its Lord is so patient, believers tend to become discouraged and its enemies are emboldened. But in the end, the Kingdom alone will stand, and everything else will be overthrown.

Our job is planting, sharing the gospel. God, in his own way and at his own time, will provide the growth. God reminds us in Isaiah, "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

Like maybe every one of you commits yourself to getting out there this week and inviting one friend, just one friend to church, and next week we have a hundred people, or maybe every one of you commits yourself to getting out there this week and inviting one friend, just one friend, and next week, we have all of you here, and that's it. Or maybe we canvas for four summers, hundreds of homes, and by the end of the fifth, all we've seen is one person who's come at our invitation, just one.

So the gospel goes. But if God's in control, since God's in control, it grows, and it will continue to do so. And we get to see it!

Billy Joel once wrote the song "And So It Goes" to describe a relationship he knew was doomed from the beginning. His retort? And so it goes, and so it goes. That's just the way life is, full of doom and disappointment.

Friends, it's not that way in the mission field and in the field of our own hearts when God's in control. The work of the gospel is invisible, but it's real. It is hidden, but with results that can be seen over time. It's a test of our patience and our trust in God's promise, but one thing he assures us. His gospel...and so it grows... slow it may grow...but grows it does so. Amen.