

**Mark 4:26-34 + The Word Grows + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY
4th Sunday after Pentecost + 17 June 2018**

It was a beautiful day at the lake. The warm sun shined brightly on the dark gray sand of the beach as a light breeze came off the lake. Jesus was there with his disciples and a number of others who had followed him that day, but Jesus wasn't there to relax and get a tan. He was there to teach.

His disciples sat there on the beach listening to Jesus. As he taught, people walked over and stopped to listen. The group of disciples soon became a crowd that grew and grew until the people on the outskirts of the crowd had trouble hearing Jesus. The Lord understood, so he got into a boat and went out on the water just far enough out so the water could amplify his voice. Jesus sat in the boat and continued teaching the growing crowd lining the water's edge. Jesus taught using parables—illustrations, stories from everyday life that drew his hearers in, helping them to understand the divine, heavenly truths of the Kingdom of God that Jesus was teaching. He taught them about faith, about the power of God's Word, about life in the Kingdom of God as believers live as lamps and grow in faith like crops.

What Jesus had to say about seeds that day would've been quite familiar to his hearers. Not many of us know what it's like to grow up and live on a farm, although you may have tried planting a garden or flowers in your yard. Yet what Jesus has to say about seeds uses a mystery of God's creation to make clear what God accomplishes through his Word. God's Word—the gospel, the good news of Jesus—seems so powerless, so insignificant. Yet Jesus teaches us that in a manner that defies comprehension and expectation, **THE WORD GROWS.**

“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.” At first glance, you'd think that Jesus was giving a Farming 101 lesson. He acknowledges what farmers have known from time immemorial. What have they known? You can't cause or force a seed to grow. You can't rush it either.

No matter how hard you try, you cannot be the source of life for a seed that has been planted in the soil. You can help its growth or hinder it. You can promote its growth or prevent it. You can support its growth or stymie it, but the seed in the ground will do its own growth. Farmers know that such growth goes on whether you're awake or asleep. Sometimes it's rapid growth like when corn grows so quickly in the summer time, you can practically hear the stalks grow during the night. Usually it's slow growth—often unobservable to the naked eye. Though you can't see it or explain it, growth still happens. Eventually that seed becomes a stalk, then a head, and then the kernel of wheat grows inside the head. At that point, fully grown, the farmer harvests.

...But Jesus isn't giving a Farming 101 lesson. He's talking about the Kingdom of God. What's the seed that grows without the farmer causing it to grow? That seed is the gospel. In Confirmation Class, we'd define it as *“the good news that Jesus forgives our sins.”* On its own, the gospel doesn't seem like much. It seems like just dead words and old stories—much like a seed that on its own seems dead and dried out. Yet God's Word tells us that the gospel is ***“living and active.”*** (Hebrews 4:12) Like a seed, the gospel has life in it.

How does that gospel seed grow? Consider what the Lord said through his prophet Ezekiel, ***“...I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.”*** (17:24) The Lord himself gives the gospel the power to grow in human hearts and minds, to take root, to grow and bear fruit in human lives. You see, as we scatter the seed of the gospel, the Lord God himself causes it to grow. The Lord makes the dead alive. The Lord takes dead, sinfully hostile hearts and causes them to live again. The Lord causes the seed of the gospel to go and grow wherever he pleases.

Don't believe me? Doubt that the ancient gospel can actually cause life to grow in modern, human hearts? Then look at your life! In fact, as I look out at this room of people, I catch a glimpse of that mystery which Jesus speaks of in this parable, a mystery that defies human comprehension.

I see before me a harvest of souls produced by the power of the Word. Before that Word came into your lives, your hearts were dead. Yes, you had physical life, emotional life, intellectual life, and psychological life, but in God's eyes, you were dead with no power to produce life in yourself. No matter how great your life appeared, until the gospel came into your life, you only had doubt, guilt, fear, shame, death, and hell beneath it all.

Then the Word of Christ, who suffered, died, and rose for you, came into your life in a form as weak and powerless as his lifeless corpse on the cross. Yet there in his saving Word, in the waters of Baptism, in the meal of his Supper, there was and is power that defies human explanation. That outwardly humble Word produced all by itself all the stages of spiritual life in your life from sprouting to harvest. I can't explain how, but that gospel had life in it. Life began to grow in your heart as the Spirit fed and nourished your faith. That life continues to grow through Word and Sacrament. By that power of the gospel, that life will continue to grow until Christ brings you home.

The living seed of the gospel works in ways we do not understand and defies human comprehension. Therefore, we can trust that gospel to work when and where God pleases. That means you and I often need to be patient with how the gospel works. The gospel doesn't always work at the pace we want. We scatter that seed, sharing the gospel with others. We would love to see that seed rapidly take root, sprout, and bear fruit, but we can't force or rush that seed to grow. Yet we know it can and does. We wait on the Lord, trusting in his power to give life through that gospel when and where he pleases.

After all, the gospel is ***“the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...”*** (Romans 1:16) So we trust that gospel to give life, to produce fruits of the Spirit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. We trust that gospel to cause us and others to keep growing throughout our lives. The gospel helps you to face death and to eagerly await Christ's return when he will bring us and the rest of his harvest of souls into his heavenly barn.

Now this seed of the gospel doesn't just defy human comprehension. The gospel also defies human expectation. Consider Jesus' second parable told by the lake. ***“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.”*** Again, more Farming 101. The tiniest of seeds—in this case the black mustard seed, which is very tiny—can grow as tall as 10 feet tall, making it the tallest of garden plants. That's as tall as the tallest sunflower plants and corn stalks. So what's Jesus talking about?

The gospel started in such a small and insignificant way. Christ the Word was born to a virgin mother in a Bethlehem stable. The Word made flesh grew from a child into an adult—and from him, the good news of sins forgiven went out to soul after soul and spread. In time, that Word was bruised and crushed and crucified, left lifeless and dead in a very real tomb. Then what happened? Christ the Word broke free of death and rose from the dead. Jesus conquered death and now gives life because from him the gospel grows.

To the ends of the earth, that gospel has traveled from countless mouths to countless ears of every nation, tribe, language, culture, and people. That little plant started by the gospel has grown into a big, beautiful Church. That tiny mustard seed has grown and continues to grow into a worldwide provider of saving shade for people from every corner of the earth, including us here.

Now that seed of the gospel that has taken root and grown and produced fruit in our hearts and lives, that gospel seed is placed in our trembling hearts and in our fumbling mouths. What will you do with the gospel seed? Leave it in your pocket when you leave church today? Tuck it away and forget about it?

No, you can scatter that seed! You can pitch it here and there and everywhere—and leave the growth to the Lord of the harvest. He gives you his gospel so you can keep growing. He gives you his gospel so you can keep your eyes focused on him throughout this life. He gives you his gospel to scatter in the fields of your home, your neighborhood, your workplace, your gym, your classroom, your playground, your community, so he can cause that seed to grow in ways you never imagined.

Dear Plants, to your hearts comes the promise of the Word whose power defies all human ability to understand and blows away all our expectations. The Lord of the harvest knows when and where it will grow and how much it will grow. We can be confident of this: **THE WORD GROWS.** Amen.