

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground” (Mark 4:26).

Today, Jesus teaches us the Parable of the Automatic Growing Seed and the meaning of this parable is straightforward.

- The “man” is Jesus. (Mark 4:26)
- The “seed” is the Word of God. (Mark 4:27-28)
- The “ground” are those living under God’s reign and rule. (Mark 4:26, 28)
- The “seed” sprouts automatically – on its own. (Mark 4:27)
- The “ground” with the “seed” in it produces fruit, that is the reign and rule of God being implemented in the lives of Christians. (Mark 4:27)
- The “blade,” then the “ear,” and then the “full grain” shows the Christian’s growth and maturity. (Mark 4:28)
- The “harvest” is the full goal of God’s plan. (Mark 4:29)
- The “sickle” is the Final Judgment. (Mark 4:29)
- For those in Christ, the harvest is beneficial for the “full grain,” so that by bearing fruits of faith, followers of Jesus will fare well at the Final Judgment.

As we are in the Green Season – the Season after Pentecost, we are focusing on our Christian spiritual growth. So, what do we make of this parable? What does this parable – *the Parable of the Automatic Growing Seed* – have to do with us?

What Jesus is teaching us today is a well-known fact about the growth of the seed, but He uses it to bring home to us a remarkable truth about the seed of the Word of God: **“He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear”** (Mark 4:27-28).

Now, over time, we have come to better know much about horticulture in how a seed sprouts into becoming a plant, but there is still so much that remains a mystery.

We do not know or understand the power of life and growth inherent in a seed. Farmers trust that the seed simply germinates, develops, grows, and produces more seed. So, there is no need for farmers to worry about the seed in the ground, but instead to trust the seeds to develop and grow, so the farmer takes care of other work on his farm.

So, is Jesus teaching us to just sit down, relax, and do nothing? Well, yes – and no.

Look around you. Today's attendance may not look like what you would want to see. Or today's attendance may look like more than you thought. The Kingdom of God may look like a letdown. We know that we live in God's Kingdom of grace, but when we look around, what do we see? Empty pews.

And to make matters even worse, we look at those sitting in the pews this morning. What do we see? Sinners! We see poor, miserable sinners. We see fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who aren't as active in the church as we think they ought to be. We see people who don't always treat us, or one another, as kindly as we think they should. We see people whose lives outside these church walls that don't always rise to the standards we might set for them. And if we take an honest look at yourself, we must all admit that we, too, seem altogether out of place in the Kingdom of God.

Yes, we know that when we fellowship around God's Word and Sacraments, the Kingdom of God is among us, but sometimes it is hard to believe. This just doesn't look like what we think the Kingdom of God ought to look. Shouldn't we do something?!

Again, Jesus says, "***He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how***" (Mark 4:27). But we want to know how! We want to find ways to grow! We want to know the sure way unbelievers and inactives can have the same certain hope and joy that we have in Jesus! We want to be able to explain church growth or decline!

So, when it comes to the Kingdom of God, we want to learn the steps to make church growth happen! And there are plenty of programs out there designed to help churches grow. But more often than not, these church growth programs are not focused on Jesus and His Word, but on us: what *I* can do. The focus is on the self.

The truth behind how to grow the church or how to get loved ones to believe is not in exploring what we can do, but instead in what is already done. In other words, to ask what can be done is to assume that something is missing that we can work to supply or improve. We can begin to live as if Jesus was not sufficient to do what is to be accomplished. You see, the growth of the Kingdom of God is up to Jesus, not us.

God's ministry is working. It needs no assistance. At once it is loose in the world, the reign of God has it in itself to grow. So, we don't need to help the reign of God along. It will succeed. That is the meaning of this parable.

Like the farmer has complete confidence in the seed, God's Kingdom grows mysteriously of itself through the Word. So, we marvel at the mystery of all that Jesus describes: ***"The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear"*** (Mark 4:28). Automatically, it all happens. Life resides in the seed. Only when the seed is introduced into the soil does something happen. Apart from the seed, the soil of the sinner's heart is dead, devoid of any spiritual life. Only when the living seed of the Word of God has been planted in the heart of the sinner can spiritual life be generated and sustained. So, the soil without the seed is dead. Likewise, the human heart without the Word of God is dead.

So, what are we to do? Is there anything we can do? As followers of Christ, He has given us vocations – or callings in our daily living. And as Christians, we are seen as "little Christs." We follow the Light of Christ and so His light is reflected onto us. Here, in the Divine Service, our faith in Christ takes root and is strengthened as it is fertilized, watered, and pruned through His Law and Gospel and in His forgiveness of our sins. Here, the Holy Spirit causes us to ***"Know and Grow"*** in Christ, so that we can ***"Go"*** to share the good news of salvation in Christ to others.

As the Christian faith has taken root and grown in our lives through Word and Sacrament, Jesus uses us in our daily vocations to bring that same seed – *the Word of God* – to others. St. Paul puts it this way, ***"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth"*** (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Like the "man" in our parable, we go about our day-to-day business as a child of God in our God-given vocations – *in our homes, schools, workplaces, and communities*. For we are a people who are called by the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism into Jesus' death, formed by grace and forgiveness, shaped by mercy received at the Lord's Table, who live by faith and prayer, patience and hope.

So, we confidently ask God to grant the growth He wills for us, for those we love, for the one Holy Christian and apostolic Church throughout the world, and for those in whom the Kingdom of God is still but a seed.

Now, always take confidence in Jesus words here that the Word of God is the seed, and this Word of God is always powerful and reliable. All that needs to be done, and all that can be done, is to sow the seed, to proclaim the Word of God. The power is in the seed, the Word of God. It is sown; it sprouts; it matures; it is harvested. For God says, *“So shall My Word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it”* (Isaiah 55:11).

The triune God grows His Kingdom. Though at times we may not see the results, there will be a harvest because the seed has God’s power within it.

This Parable of the Automatic Growing Seed was said by Jesus to steady His disciples, to comfort them, to assure them. Jesus said this parable to steady, comfort and assure us, too.

Jesus is the One who sows the seed of the Word. His seed will go out and many will have ears to hear, many will receive a heart to humble itself and believe and follow. He keeps on sowing for the spiritual life and growth of His Kingdom – *the Church*, until the gracious time of sowing comes to a close at the Final Judgment. For us, who are in Christ, His Word produces spiritual fruit in Him, which will come to an end at our death – or if Christ returns first. Then comes the judgment, but this sickle of judgment holds no terror for us in Christ, since we are harvested and transformed from the Church Militant to the Church Triumphant.

So rather than stress, know that when it comes to the growth of God’s Kingdom be like a farmer, who trusts in his seeds to produce. For by Jesus’ atoning death and bodily resurrection, God the Father will grant growth in His time and in His way. For now, just spread the seed of His Word, then sleep and rise night and day trusting that the Holy Spirit will sprout and grow those seeds while not knowing how. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +