Pentecost 4, June 17, 2018: Mark 4:26–34

**Other Lessons:** Ezekiel 17:22–24; Psalm 1; 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 (11–17)

Mark chapter 4 can be called the “seed” chapter because this is the only place (in Mark) where you will find the parables about seeds. There are 3 of them in this chapter, the parable of the [lavish] sower, the parable of the [mysterious] growing seeds (which is unique to Mark’s Gospel), and the parable of the [unexpected growth] of the mustard seed.

Though the first parable of the sower is not part of our reading today, it is important to briefly mention it because these parables are related, especially when Mark puts them all together (though chapter divisions are an artificial arrangement). In this parable the sower scatters the seeds and they fall onto 4 kinds of soils. Some fell on the path so that they were eaten by birds before taking root. Some fell on rocks so that the roots were not well established enough and they died from the scorching sun. Some fell among thorns so that they were chocked and grew poorly. Finally, some fell on good soil so that they grow and yielded manifold. Jesus then explains to his puzzled disciples that the seeds represented the word of God but when different people hear the same word, we see different results. Only when the seed falls on the good soil do you see the growth.

This then leads to the inevitable question in our hearts: How does this growth actually work? How can I become or maintain the good soil? How can I avoid becoming the bad soil? How can I determine if my neighbor has good soil? We all want to know the “how” in the workings of God. Thus Jesus gives 2 more parables so that we see the full picture, to see how God actually works in our lives.

In the first parable for today, from verse 26 to 29, Jesus compares the kingdom of God with the whole action of sowing and reaping of the seed. Though the farmer does not know how or why the seeds grow, he knows they will grow. Though this is a completely different and separate parable from the previous one, the connection is still there. The kingdom of God comes through the seed, which is word of God, planted into the hearts of men. The seed is planted and it grows. But notice here that Jesus does not tell us the “how” of the growth. It simply grows. The growth is not a function of the soil, whether good or bad, but it grows by the power of God (as Paul himself says in 1Cor3:6-7, neither the one who plants or waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow). It is God who gives life, not the soil or the water or anything else (though these things certainly are important, they are not the “cause”). That life is in the seed, that power is in the word of God.

But today many people are tempted to think that they need to grow the church by their own efforts and ideas. This is essentially the motivation behind the so-called “church growth movement” from the 1960s. The entire premise is that the church should be treated like any other secular organization so that growth of the church is based on social analysis and research. Of course it started with a good intention, which is to fulfill the so-called “great commission” of making disciples from Matthew 28 (though it must be noted that this passage has never been used this way historically until about 200 years ago!).

How can the church get more people? The question is always the “how” and if the word of God is not the primary function in this equation, what then is the method? Relevance became the answer. The church looked to culture, the felt needs of the people, and used what “attracted” people, because these were perceived to be relevant to the lives of the people. Things like “contemporary music”, theatre church settings, liberal theology, and many others were used to “attract” people into the church. Again, some of these are not inherently wrong or bad, but when these things overtake the centrality of God’s word, then there is a problem. We are then tempted to follow the ways of the world.

On the other hand we despair and become discouraged when we don’t see growth in the church. It is as though there is no more hope, as though God has left all the work to us and we have to figure out how to sustain the church.

We must not forget that the lord of the church is still and always will be the lord of the church. He looks after her, he takes care of her, he plants, waters, and he will bring the growth. At the heart of this is the unbelief in the power and efficacy of the word of God. Most people will believe that the bible is the word of God (usually in the infallibility and inerrancy), but interestingly, not many people actually believe that it does anything except giving us information. The bible is true but it is true not only in the sense of the facts, because it is by the word of God that everything comes into being. The word of God does something to us. And so anything, any methods, ideas, endeavors, that do not depend on the word of God to give growth is in fact contrary to God’s word. A church may have programs, strategies, and all kinds of activities, but if these things are not rooted in the word of God, then they are mere human efforts and will produce nothing.

People will object and say that I am narrowing and limiting the power of God. I am not, in fact, it is God himself who has bound himself to his own words. It is still the same question, whether you believe in the word of God or not. We like to see results immediately. We want quantitative results so we can track our successfulness (or lack thereof). Why should we trust only in what we see and not what God says? Do we believe his word to be true and powerful and effective?

Thus we have the third parable from verse 30 to 32 for this very purpose, not only to show us that indeed the word of God and the kingdom of God will fulfill its promise to be the greatest kingdom of all, but in knowing this our faith is built up. The mustard seed is indeed NOT the smallest seed on earth (biologically speaking), BUT it was the smallest seed used in a planted garden in the ancient middle east. The point is quite simple, something that is so small and insignificant can become so great and wonderful. And that is how the kingdom of God is established and grows.

Indeed looking at the general unfaithfulness of the people, the declining church attendance, the antagonistic sentiments against the church and the Christian, we may wonder if the word does have any effect at all. But again, we must remember that Jesus is still the king of the kingdom of God, Jesus is still the lord of his church. Things must not be received according to our external evaluation, but according to God’s word, which cannot fail.

And this we can be certain because the king himself came as a lowly servant. He abased himself so that he may die for the sins of the whole world. No one expected him to be the king. He was ridiculed and rejected by men. He even dies as a criminal. But by the cross he shows that God has not abandoned his creation. He has not forgotten the promise of the seed to Adam and Eve and all mankind. In fact this was the plan from before the creation, that his presence would be so insignificant. And yet it was exactly because of his humility that he was born of a woman and suffer under Pontius Pilate. And yet that is the power of God at work (as Paul declares in Rm1:16). And in his resurrection, new life has come upon the earth. It gave birth to the church. The kingdom of God grows exponentially so that all birds, that is, all people are incorporated into Christ. The kingdom of God will not stop because Christ is the cause and the goal of it all (the alpha/omega).

This is our certainty in the word of God, in the power and efficacy of the word of God. Just as he spoke all things into existence, so also by the word incarnate, the church began. And now the spoken word (which includes the preaching and the sacraments) continue to work to give life and growth in Christ.

Therefore we need not despair and try to find a solution from ourselves or from these so-called church gurus, who use the wisdom of this world. Earlier I mentioned that people sought “relevance” as the answer to gaining people. Rather than relevance, our answer is reverence, the sense of fear, love, and trust in the God who is victorious over all things. Christ is still with us. Christ is still the lord of his church. He gives the growth through his word, because he said it, he will do it. So learn to trust in him, which is simply done by immersing yourself in his word. It is not an exaggeration when pastors say that everything depends on faith. And this faith only comes by the word of God. So learn it, meditate on it, let it be a blessing to us all.