

Pastor Luke C. Werre

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Sermon Text: Mark 4:26-34

BY ITS OWN POWER AND BEYOND OUR EXPECTATIONS GOD'S KINGDOM GROWS

I'd like to share with you a secret. Every Sunday I am amazed that anyone shows up. There are a thousand other things any of us could be doing right now. It really wows me to see people here. I never get over it.

Now don't take that to mean, "Hey! Pastor Werre doesn't expect us to go to church! Woo-hoo!" The reason for my never-ending surprise is that we, all of us, live in a sin-drenched world, in our sin-drenched bodies and our sin-darkened minds with satan constantly harping to separate us from God. To me, it is never surprising whenever someone neglects, avoids or even rejects God's truth. That is something all of us do naturally. The truly amazing miracle is when the Holy Spirit gives us the desire to come to church, the resolve to follow through and, more than that, faith to believe the message.

This is the miracle Jesus speaks to in the Gospel Lesson today from Mark 4. Jesus is preaching a sermon, standing in a boat just off shore, because the people had been crowding him. Mark 4 tells us He spoke in parables. With two parables Jesus sets forth this truth: *By its own power and beyond our expectations God's Kingdom grows.*

First, we need to understand what is meant by God's Kingdom. Let's use the picture of gardening as Jesus does. What we see in your garden in the month of August is not the whole story. There is all the planning, planting, cultivating, growing, weeding and later on everything that pertains to harvesting the produce. Your garden is not a static concept. It is a center of continuous activity.

Similarly, a kingdom is not a static thing. It is an advancing, ruling activity. By the Kingdom of God, Jesus is talking about everything that pertains to God's saving activity – how through the seed of His gospel He germinates faith, how He cultivates a person's loyalty by His grace and gains their willing obedience, how He bestows the believer with spiritual gifts like patience, forbearance, humility and how He produces fruits of faith so that the believer's faith translates into action, how God sets the believer up as His own

heir, His own prince or princess to the throne. It is a Kingdom that endures and dominates over any earthly nation or culture, for all things are made to serve God's Kingdom one way or another. In short the Kingdom of God is everything that pertains to God's saving activity.

Here's what Jesus said, *The kingdom of God is like this: A man scatters seed on the ground, and while he sleeps and rises, night and day the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. The ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head. When the crop is ready, he swings the sickle without delay, because the harvest has come.*

We so easily overlook the greatest miracle of any garden. The seeds sprout! How? Why? What makes that happen? No one can explain it. Do what you might to help things along and make it a well-cultivated garden, but you cannot cause the plants to mature and ripen. That it does all by itself.

This is also the miracle of God's Kingdom. We plant the seed of His Word. This is our job. And try as we might to help it along, only the Holy Spirit can cause that Word to take root in someone's heart, to sprout faith, to produce godly behavior. A former professor of mine speaking to a classroom full of future pastors put it this way, "You can perform ever so poorly on Sunday morning, gentlemen, but if the Holy Spirit wants to do some work, He's going to do some work."

The point is not that it's OK if we are sloppy or lazy. As grateful recipients of God's grace we want to honor Him with our best efforts. But our sinful minds are so inclined to think it is our effort that makes all the difference, our effort works salvation. For example, we might think, "If only the pastor were more charismatic, then we would really win souls for Christ." Or we might try to take credit for God's working: "It's because our church is so friendly – that's why we're growing so fast. It's because my Sunday School lessons are so creative –that's why the children I teach have such a love for Jesus." Maybe it becomes a sort of a legalistic inclination. For example, "If a church doesn't use projections they obviously don't care about visitors. If you don't have something religious on your desk at work, then clearly you're not fulfilling your Christian calling." Even when we blame ourselves, have you ever considered, even when we blame ourselves it is a form of trying to push God away and take over His work? For example, "Where did I go wrong as a parent that things have gone so haywire with my children? I thought I had brought them up to be Christian but clearly I have failed." Heart-breaking as it is, even that betrays our sinful inclination to take credit for what is God's work alone.

All these things reveal how our natural minds are not aligned with God's mind - and that leaves us on the outs with God -truly outside of His realm. Being on the outside is not a good place to be, because that's what it means to be damned. But God be thanked, as salvation is His work alone, His Son Jesus atoned for our sinful thinking by His death on the cross, and without any contribution or effort on our part, He forgives all our sins and kindly includes us into God's inner circle as part of God's Kingdom.

I think of what Martin Luther wrote in His Small Catechism about the petition in the Lord's Prayer that says, "Your Kingdom come." Luther wrote: *God's kingdom certainly comes by itself even without our asking, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us and to many others.* And that's really what these two parables by Jesus are all about. They are an assurance to us that God works by grace, that He brings salvation because He wants to. He does it out of sheer kindness - whether we've been faithful or unfaithful. He brings it to the willing and the unwilling. He brings it to those who've got their act together and those whose lives are a mess. The Bible says His desire is for people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. And since that is His heart's desire, He Himself works to make it happen.

So as we do our best to fulfill the task He has given us - the task of planting the seed, of teaching His Word, of modeling His love, of being conduits of His grace, Jesus assures us that our efforts are not in vain. His Kingdom comes in a most magnificent way. He says: *To what should we compare the kingdom of God? Or with what parable may we picture it? It is like a mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is one of the smallest of all the seeds planted in the ground. Yet when it is planted, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the sky can nest under its shade.*

No matter how insignificant or of no consequence our efforts may appear to us, God is able to grow His Kingdom beyond anything we can imagine. We are not saved by an outward organization. We are saved through faith in Jesus. And therefore we cannot always see the extent to which God's Kingdom grows. A friend of mine attended a Christian gathering on the capitol square. She was floored by the massive crowd that showed up - of all places here in Madison - Madison, the home of institutional atheism. You would have heard nothing about it in the news or on social media. Her remark was that we Christians are made to feel like we are all alone, like we are very few. But there are many, many more people who acknowledge Jesus as Lord than we realize.

We do not see it now, but on the Last Day when Christ returns, we will behold a vast sea of people from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before His throne.

So, brothers and sisters, let us faithfully do our best to fulfill the task God has assign to us of planting His Word -whether as a congregation, or as parents, or as a school or as neighbors and coworkers. But then let us feel the relief with gratitude and joy, trust that by its own power and beyond our expectations God's Kingdom grows.