

St Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for Pentecost 22 (Sowing Seeds -- Stewardship #2) – October 25th and 28th, 2012

Mark 4:26-29

He also said, “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.”

Dear Children of God,

I don't really know how a tomato seed sprouts and produces a plant. Guess I don't remember much from high school biology, but I do know that the sprouting of a seed is called “germination,” so I looked that up and found this: “Germination is the growth of an embryonic plant contained within a seed. The seed contains an embryo and stored food reserves. Under favorable conditions the seed begins to germinate, and the embryonic tissues resume growth, developing to a seedling.” OK, but I still don't know how a tomato seed does that. How does that plant “embryo” have the ability to suddenly, under the right conditions, start to grow? to send roots down and a stalk up and get big and leafy and then produce luscious, red, juicy tomatoes? I'm sure a botanist could explain it more to me, but I'm not sure that even a botanist could explain how that simple little seed has the power of life in it! But of course you don't have to know that, do you, in order to grow tomatoes? You just need some seeds and some dirt and you're on your way. Put the seeds in the dirt and wait for that mysterious power to produce a sprout, then a plant, then a tomato. Sure, there are things you can do to help it along, but finally, the power of life isn't in you and it isn't in the dirt, it's in the seed. You just plant it and watch it grow and enjoy the results!

That, Jesus said, is what the “kingdom of God” is like. There he sat, in a fishing boat pushed out a little ways on the lake. That was his pulpit, his classroom, as he taught the people lined up on the shore. He taught them using parables. You remember what that is; a parable is a comparison that uses something familiar and down-to-earth to teach some big truth about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. With each parable, Jesus taught usually one main thing about how God works with his grace in people's hearts (that's the “kingdom”).

Here he had just finished the parable about the man who scattered his seed on the ground, with a variety of results. In that one, as Jesus explained, the seed stands for the Word of God. That's the key to understanding that parable. That is one of his longer parables; here's one of the shorter ones, and it's also about seed that's planted. So, what do we learn in this little parable about the kingdom of God? We learn that:

Theme: God's Seed Is Powerful!

- 1. Powerful enough to save our sinful hearts**
- 2. Powerful enough to change our sinful lives**

What is the most important thing farmers must do? They need to actually go and plant the seed. No Planting Seeds – No Harvest! Well that's obvious! That's the farmer's job. Of course, he has to actually do it. The seeds can't scatter themselves. But this has to happen, and the farmer does it confidently. He throws the seed on the ground in the confidence that it will sprout and grow. And it does! It does, whether he is awake and busy with other stuff or asleep and doing nothing. The seed germinates and grows. He doesn't really know how and doesn't need to. It just does, because that seed has in itself the mysterious, invisible power of life.

I'm sure you've already figured out the meaning so far. The seed is, again, the Word of God. That day, the sower was Jesus himself. Later, when his work of redemption was done, he would send out his apostles

and, in fact, all future believers to “scatter” the Word of God. The soil, the dirt, the ground -- that’s the human heart, where God wants his Word to germinate and take root and grow and produce results. When his Word is scattered on human hearts, that’s exactly what it does in many of them.

But some may ask, “Does God’s Word really have the power to save my sinful heart?” Really? It does! Jesus said, **“The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”** Does that seed really produce results? It Does! God also said through Isaiah, **“My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”** Does God’s Word really have life-giving power in it? It does! Peter wrote, **“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring Word of God.”** I guess the answer is, “Yes, it does!”

But sometimes we have so little confidence in it, don’t we? So little confidence in the power of God’s Word that we don’t sow it, don’t even scatter it on the ground. But would a farmer ever look at his bags of seed and think, “This seed will probably never grow anyhow, why should I bother to plant it?” That would be foolish, but do Christians ever say to themselves, “Him? Oh, he’ll never believe in Jesus... Her? No way she’ll ever be a Christian!” I wonder if we think we can “read” the soil, that we can tell ahead of time whether this person or that person will believe or not? And if not, why bother, right? Or maybe some have so little love for souls and so little interest in God’s kingdom that they’re content to let others do the sowing?

But why should we not be confident? Jesus said, **“all be itself the soil produces grain.”** This is the natural course of things; you put seed in the dirt and it grows up and produces grain or corn or a tomato. He doesn’t mean that it’s the soil that actually produces it; that’s just where it happens. That dirt is dead; it has no life in it until you plant the seed. That soil will produce nothing unless you plant the seed. But when you do - wow! It germinates, and roots go down, a stalk goes up, the head is formed and then the mature grain!

This is what happens in the human heart when God’s Word is planted and God’s grace is at work (the “kingdom”). There’s life that was not there before, and it grows and produces fruit. Now, the folks sitting on the shore that day who heard Jesus say this, but were not believers yet, almost certainly didn’t understand what he meant. That’s the nature of parables. His disciples however, could; believers like you can understand it.

If you want proof that God’s seeds works where it is scattered, just take a look around this morning. Take a look at your own heart and the hearts of the many people who call St. Luke’s their spiritual home. Take a look at the many people throughout the world whose hearts have been saved through the spreading and scattering of God’s Word. If God’s seed doesn’t work, we would not have churches and there would not be Christians. If God’s Word didn’t work there would be no one to sow the seed and there would be no thank offerings to support the work of sowing the seed. But this is not the case. We have a group of people that calls St. Luke’s Church their spiritual home where they come together to gather around God’s seed – his Word and Sacrament. We have the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) which is a larger group of churches united around God’s Word eager to serve and thank the God who has given us everything. We know that God’s Word of Law and Gospel is powerful. In the simplest terms, God’s powerful Word leads us to repentance and gives us faith in Christ, and produces better things than tomatoes. It produces spiritual fruit, starting with a heart that hates sin in every form and looks to Jesus for redemption, forgiveness, peace with God. And that’s not all. That same powerful seed that saved our sinful hearts also is powerful enough to change our sinful lives.

2. Powerful enough to change our sinful lives

There is more. The same Word that saves our sinful hearts also gives us the power to live for Jesus. Like a mouth that confesses Christ both in worship and in witness. Like love that finds its outlet in all kinds of good works. Like feet that go and hands that serve. Like a mind that grows in the knowledge of God. Like ears that want to hear more of this Word. Like a Christian who grows in strength, patience, perseverance. Like a Christian who grows in resistance to temptation. Like a Christian who grows in joy and grows in bold

and confident praying. Like a Christian who grows in cheerfully accepting God's discipline. Like a Christian who grows in the hope of heaven and grows in godliness and peace.

Always growing, always producing -- that's what happens when God's Word is planted and God's grace is at work in people's hearts. The good news about our Savior falls on our hearts. The truth of what God's Son did to redeem us gives us life. That Jesus lived righteously and obediently comforts us, because his flawless righteousness is counted as ours. That he suffered and died comforts us, because our sins were counted as his and cannot condemn us anymore. That he rose from death comforts us, because his life is our life. Trusting in him, we have life in us -- spiritual life, eternal life, fruit-producing life!

Do we really believe that God's Word is powerful enough to change our sinful lives? Do we truly believe that every time we come to church God's seed is sown and is active and powerful in our hearts and lives? Do we truly believe that God's Word is the only way that our hearts will be changed and strengthened to live for Jesus in all that we say and do? If we truly believe that God's Word has that kind of power, what would be our reasons for missing a time to come to church and hear this Word and let this Word grow in my heart? There are not many good reasons, are there? What is our goal -- to attend worship once, twice or three times a month, every time or whenever it is convenient? Or worse yet, do we not even have a goal?

If God's Word is so powerful do we make the time and exert the effort to let God talk to us as we open our bibles to study and learn more about the God who has given us everything? Most of us would admit that we know many things about our jobs -- all the ins and outs from memory. You could list off facts and information without missing a beat. (you have to or you might lose your jobs) But when it comes to what our God says, we often times have to admit that we have not taken the time to learn more about the one thing needful -- in fact we know very little. How can we truthfully say that we are living for God -- giving faithfully of our time and, talents and treasures -- if we haven't let the power of God's Word very near to our hearts? How can we faithfully sow the seed that God wants us to, if we haven't first gathered around that seed ourselves? How can we truly give generous and cheerful thank offerings to God, if we don't first let God's Word give us the power to do so? It is impossible to serve our God and do his will, if we are not closely connected to the powerful Word of God.

You might ask, and it would be a good question, "What in God's Word makes it so powerful?" In the Bible, God's law and gospel is laid out before to us. We need the law and gospel on our own hearts day after day so they remain fertile and productive. Without applying God's law and gospel to our lives we can never overcome the sin that is in our own hearts. Without God's law and gospel active in our lives we will never be strong. We need God's law to point out our sin, to demonstrate to us how we are messing up, to convince us about what has to change and that we can't bring about that change on our own. We need the gospel to point out God's continuing love for us in spite of the way we continue to sin against him. We need to gospel to demonstrate to us our eternal security, and to convince us of our status as his dearly loved children. We put these forces to work whenever we read and study the Word for ourselves, when we mull it over, and act on what it says. That's why Psalm 1 says, "**Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night**" (Psalm 1:1,2). Those forces are at work among us in our congregation as we assemble to worship, join in group Bible study, and commune together at Jesus' Table to eat and drink his body and blood for our full and complete forgiveness.

Jesus urges us to use law and gospel not just in our own lives personally but also here in our own congregation. It is also the same law and gospel God wants us to proclaim to our community, and throughout our synod, and to the entire world. Law and gospel is what leads us to joyfully and willingly contribute our time, our energy, our gifts, our money so that many more hearts may be made alive with the knowledge of God's forgiveness and the true peace in knowing heaven is their home.

God's Word, yes, this simple seed, is just so powerful! May the grace of Christ that so comforts us also compel us to sow this seed eagerly and energetically, wherever, whenever and however and to whomever we can. Lord, give us a humble confidence to trust that the power is not in us -- it's in the seed. Give us a vision of what your Word can and will accomplish in us, in our children and in so many others, with its mysterious, invisible, life-giving power! Amen.