

Mark 4:26-34

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Today we look at the first of Jesus' parables in our pericope for today, "And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 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. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

When Carter was born, Lindsay decided that we should take a picture of him every day so that we can see his growth. This was a very helpful practice because through it, we were able to have a greater appreciation of the changes that occurred slowly throughout the course of that first year of his life.

Changes that we would not have seen or fully appreciated

otherwise. And this is not uncommon. How many of you, when you saw your aunts, uncles, cousins, or any other family members that you didn't see often they commented on how much you'd grown since they saw you last when you were a kid?

This is the reality of growth. It happens so slowly and innocuously that it's easy to miss. In the same way, the righteousness grows and develops in us when the Word of the Lord has been planted in us. Over time, the Word enters into us and into our ears. Slowly, sometimes excruciatingly slowly, things begin to change. The problem is that we want things now. We want to see the development and the change now. We want a tangible and quantifiable measure of our spiritual growth. We demand to see our lives changing here and now.

Now, don't misunderstand me here. There is nothing inherently wrong with us desiring to see spiritual growth within

ourselves. We should rightly be living out our faith. But far too often, the measure for our growth is not ourselves. It's other people. We come to church and we walk through the doors nodding at and greeting people. We shake their hands and then we make our way to our seat and then we turn on the scanners. We begin to look over the people around us. We tell ourselves that we are a better Christian than that person over there because we heard a rumor about them. We decide that we are certainly a better Christian than her over there because, come on, just look at how she's dressed.

But then we turn our heads to look around on the other side of the church. We see someone who makes us feel like a brand-new Christian. There is someone who is a far better Christian than we'll ever be, we think. They study the Bible and pray every single day. I mean, who does that?! And then we open up our Bibles and try to measure ourselves up against the great

heroes of faith in the Bible. Abraham, David, Samson, Daniel, Peter, and Paul. Oh, what we wouldn't give to be even half the Christian they were!

And it becomes quite apparent that if they are the standard, we will never live up. We might find some solace in determining that we are better than the people on that other side of the church, but we know that we won't be as good as those on the other side either. I'll leave it up to you all to decide which side is which here. But what it does is leave us feeling alone. It might not be right away. It might take time. It might even take years or decades. But when we think that we are responsible for the growth of our righteousness, we are setting ourselves up for failure, disappointment, and despair. Further, we are also not paying very close attention to the Word of Jesus.

In this parable that we are looking at today, we see a man who goes and scatters seed on the ground. He goes about his life

after this, and the seeds sprout and grow, eventually coming to full maturity and to the time of harvest. It all happens totally apart from the man who planted the seeds. Now, it is imperative here that we understand a very key word in this parable. Jesus says that the kingdom of God is “*as if...*” This, and parables like it, are similes. They explain what the kingdom of God is *like*. We ought not to read this as a complete and full treatise on how the kingdom of God works.

Rather, this points us to a single truth. It is a truth that we are meant to take, learn, and accept. The truth here that Jesus is speaking is that the growth happens as it is going to happen. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has made sure that the seed of the Word has been sown. His Church has taken his Word out into all the world and thousands of people hear the name of Jesus every single day. And the Church grows. But it doesn't grow by leaps and bounds every day. We all have had experiences of sharing

our faith with someone and they have rejected it or even mocked us for it. If you haven't had that experience, try it sometime. It's a challenge.

But the point that Jesus is making here is similar to the point that he made to Nicodemus from our text a few weeks ago, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." We simply do not have everything figured out about how God works. It is something that is too difficult for us to consider every piece of the puzzle. From our own shortsighted view, we want things now. We want to measure things now. But God doesn't work like this. No, he plays the long game.

Our world was created in spite of God having the full knowledge that Adam and Eve would fall into sin and that they would be rescued by Jesus. But it didn't happen right away.

Thousands of years passed before the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ is the one promised to Adam and Eve and hoped for throughout the entirety of the Old Testament. But he wasn't born right away. No, God had a plan. He had a definite plan for when his Messiah would be born and how he would live and die for our redemption.

And in the fullness of time, Christ was born. He lived according to the Law in a way that none of us could ever hope to accomplish. And through his ministry, he taught and proclaimed the Kingdom of God. He sowed the Word of God everywhere he went. And he equipped others to go out and cast this same Word.

Just like the man in the parable that Jesus teaches, he slept. He slept the righteous sleep of the one who had redeemed his people. But he only was able to enter this sleep after he had suffered for your sins and mine at the cross. He fertilized the

earth with his very own blood. He called out on the cross and then he fell asleep. Not safe and warm in his bed, but naked, bloodied, and defeated. But yet he also rose again. He slipped the bands of death and walked out of that tomb totally, miraculously alive. That is our Lord. That is the one who has given us his Word.

And he has given us his Spirit. The same Spirit that blows where, when, and how it wishes also causes the Word to sprout up into faith in ways that defy our logic or efforts. We cannot make people Christians because it is the power of the Spirit and the will of Christ that such things happen. No matter what we do, it is always and only God who brings growth to his kingdom. And he does indeed bring growth.

I talked about how much of a dead end it is to look for our spiritual growth in comparison to other people, and it is. We would do better to look at our own lives to see how we have

grown. But we ought not to look at it with a critical eye, as though we should expect to see certain measurable and identifiable goals. While we may look for milestone developments in the life of a child, we ought not to look at our spiritual life in this way. No, we should simply look at the growth as a passive observer, simply recognizing what is there. Some seeds take longer to sprout above the ground than others. That doesn't mean nothing is happening there. Sometimes it is necessary for the roots to grow deep before we see anything measurable at the surface.

In the same way, when we see someone who we might be tempted to judge for their lack of righteousness, it is better for us to pray for them that they might be upheld in the hands of the Lord who died for them and for you. We can trust that the growth will come. It is not our job to make it happen any more than it is our job to get out there in the field with a ruler every

day to measure the progress of the grain. We simply come here and continue to be fed with the body and blood of Christ. We turn to his Word so that it can sprout up in us into faith, righteousness, and virtue. We do not know how it does this, and that's ok. All things work for the one who created them and they work at his will. So also shall we be cared for and grow as it is his will for it to happen. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting.

Amen.