

July 2, 2006
Pentecost 4

"The Word of the Lord Grows Like Planted Seed"

MARK 4:26-34

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain-- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." ³⁰ Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." ³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Jesus was a good teacher. He taught people with parables or stories that left them thinking over and over in their minds the point or truth that he was making to them. He used pictures from daily life such as sheep wandering off and getting lost, a son running away from home and getting into trouble, or a bride coming to claim his bride on the wedding night. On more than one occasion Jesus used the picture of a farmer sowing or planting seed in the field to illustrate how the Word of God grows in the lives of people and brings them the blessings of the kingdom of God.

The farmer plants seed and the seed grows even while he is sleeping. Last night as you were sleeping the seed of God's Word planted in people has been changing their lives and helping them to see the blessings they have in Jesus. Last night as you were sleeping the Word of God grew in some people with such power that it created an amazing faith and trust in Jesus that literally takes your breath away.

As we enter into the last chapter of the world's history, we may be tempted to tinker and tweak or alter and adjust the plan that God has for bringing people the blessings of Christ and his kingdom. Marketing experts offer the Christian church 21st century techniques and psychological tools to make the word of God do its job "more effectively." We don't want these tools. We want to sow the seed of God's Word faithfully. Then we can sit back and let God's Word do its work. Let's listen to Jesus show us how the Word of the Lord grows like planted seed.

It grows while we are sleeping

The first example shows us that God's Word is going to be growing in the lives of people even when we are sleeping or not thinking about it. Jesus 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." Look at the amazing way plants can grow. In June I spent three days at convention in the Phoenix area. When

I returned home the tomato plants in my back yard had nearly doubled in size. Not once during the convention did I think about the tomato plants. I never asked my wife, "How are the tomato plants doing?" They grew by themselves because that is what God has designed seeds and plants to do.

Anyone who has worked with plants or planted seeds in the ground is truly amazed at how a seed that is dry and dormant begins to sprout and grow when it becomes moist and warm. From the tiniest little green sprout comes forth a plant that follows the design or DNA coding that was in the plant. Tomato plants can have cherry tomatoes, yellow tomatoes, Roma tomatoes and large beefsteak tomatoes. God places this miracle of growth within the seed. I think it was C.S. Lewis who once said that so much of what happens in nature or the plant world, mirrors what happens in the kingdom of God.

God's Word's word will produce results in the lives of people whenever they hear or read the message of the gospel. The Lord himself has told us in Isaiah 55: 10,11: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out of my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Just as the tomato seed has the purpose of growing tomatoes, and the cucumber seed cucumbers, so God's Word has a purpose and design to it when it is planted into the lives of people. The purpose of the Word is to lead people to see Jesus as their King of kings and Lord of lords, and to accept and believe in him and all the blessings he has to offer. How true are the words of John that tell us, "But these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life through his name."

Let me illustrate to you how important God's Word is by pointing to the example of a man who made the news this past week for giving billions of dollars to charity. The man, Warren Buffet, is one of the richest men in the world. He pledged to give billions to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for medical research to cure diseases. We applaud such acts of kindness and love. We are grateful when people take their money and use it for other people instead of on themselves. But when Warren Buffet made the gift he also said, "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way." How sad. He actually believes he can use his money and his generosity to provide a better place for himself in the future. All of us were born with such wrong thinking. We need God's Word planted like seed in our lives to show us that no matter how much money we give to people, or how kind we are, all our best efforts continually fail to atone for even one sin.

God's Word reveals the startling truth of how much we need Jesus. Isaiah 59 says, "So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light and all is darkness...like the blind we grope the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes." God's word lets us know the truth of how lost we are with Jesus. We cannot find justice or the hope being declared not guilty by anything we do. God's Word points us to Jesus our only hope of pardon and peace with God with such words as spoken by John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." When the good news of Jesus dying, living and rising again for us is presented to people, this free gift changes their hearts and leads them to believe.

Think of the power that exists in seeds. Think of the greater power that exists in the Word of God. When you read it in your personal it may instantly begin to sprout and grow as it brings you closer to Jesus. Or the seed of the Word may lay dormant for weeks, and months and years, and suddenly some truth you encountered weeks ago, takes on new meaning and sends forth new roots into your life. It happens when you are sleeping, or driving down the freeway, or working in the yard. God's Word is an amazing thing, like seed planted in the ground that works even when you are not thinking about it consciously. Such is the nature of faith planted by the Holy Spirit through the Word.

It grows more than we realize

What amazes us about the seed of God's Word is the growth that comes from just a little seed. Jesus said, "And what shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." In California we are familiar with the yellow mustard plant that grows on the hills. The seeds are tiny, but they are able to produce a large plant. After the El Nino storms of 1998 one rancher told me the mustard was so high in some places he could not look over the plants when he was riding his horse. I saw plants that tall on a hike to Point Sal. It is amazing how such large plants can come from the smallest of seeds.

So it is with God's Word. You just don't know what to expect when you plant the seed of the Word into the lives of people. You never know when it will reach people with such force and power that the worst of sinners can become some of the most amazing missionaries for the Christian faith. Such was the case with John Newton, who worked on the slave ships along the coast of Africa. He drank heavily and led a wild life thinking only about himself. But then he came back to the amazing grace he had come to know as a child before his mother died. If his mother had been alive, imagine the joy she would have experienced when he came back to faith again and became a powerful witness to the Christian faith, even preaching on one occasion to the queen of England. Imagine her joy of singing the hymn written by her son that made him famous, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me." That's the way it is with God's Word. I was reading in Luke 3 this past week and struck by the words describing the life of John the Baptist. "During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of the God came to John, son of Zechariah in the desert." John the Baptist was one of the most powerful and dynamic preachers the world has ever known. God's Word can create growth in our lives that takes our breath away.

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul writes, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but gave the increase. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." God makes the Word grow and he determines what the final outcome will be. Raising plants is fun because you never know what the final results will be. There are times when nothing seems to grow right. There are other times when you suddenly see a plant grow into an amazing plant and produce remarkable fruit. Last year we had a volunteer tomato plant grow in the tiny space between the sidewalk and the foundation of the house. It was an area that was covered with bark chips and received no water, but somehow that plant grew. We did not pull it, but let it grow to see what would happen. It never did get very large, but it sure put out some amazingly good tomatoes. That's the

way it is with plants and that is the way it is in the kingdom of God.

I once read of a Sunday school teacher in North Carolina at a tiny country church (I don't know how true this story is). Week after week she faithfully prepared her lesson and only one or two showed up for the class. One of the little fellows, Billy, never missed a Sunday. When she felt like quitting she thought of Billy and his love for the Lord and the Word of God. Many times she thought she was a failure. But God blessed the growth of his Word in little Billy. Later on "Billy" William Franklin Graham began preaching in Los Angeles in a tent on Hill Street and then the crowds came. Little Billy, the 6 foot 4 raw-boned preacher from North Carolina has preached to millions. Plant the seed of the Word and then be prepared for some amazing growth,

What can God's Word do in your life? Read it. Listen to it. Then go about your tasks. God's Word will grow in your life. Who knows what growth in faith waits for you tomorrow, this week, or the rest of this month? Amen.