

Pentecost III (June 13, 2021) Text: Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Mark 4:26-34
“Seeds and Plants”

Jesus taught us: ***“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*** [John 12.24]

The underlying theme of every one of Jesus’ parables is this essential premise. The core of the Gospel is about death and resurrection. Unfortunately, too many Christians want to focus solely on the resurrection theme. Many Christians love Easter, but will avoid Good Friday at almost all costs. I have heard some members explain their absence from Good Friday worship, *“It’s too depressing.”* (I have to admit my reaction is *“Well, duh!”*)

Luther called such people “theologians of glory.” Jaroslav Pelikan summarized Luther’s view on this: *“The theologian of glory preaches that (1) humans have the ability to do the good that lies within them (quod in se est), (2) there remains, after the fall, some ability to choose the good, and (3) humans cannot be saved without participating in or cooperating with the righteousness given by God.”* I would add one other point: There can be no resurrection without something dying.

Death and resurrection were at the heart of Jesus’ teaching as well as His mission and ministry. Clearly Jesus came to die: ***“ . . . the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*** Because of Easter, we can lose sight of that, and wind up assuming that Jesus came in order to rise.

Luther pushed what he dubbed a “theology of the cross” which has at its heart the notion that, as Christ came to give of Himself, those who would follow Him must give of themselves. In this context, the primary motif is not how good we can be, but recognizing how helpless we are against sin and how much we must place our lives completely in what Jesus did on the cross. Now this all sounds quite academic, and maybe it is . . . but it comes with a point.

One of the features of the Formational Prayer Seminars at which I assist is the underlying theme that we have more than enough information about God. What we need, it is argued, is more of God Himself. Most Lutheran theologians I know (or know of) would be hard-pressed to adopt that posture. In part, because a key to Lutheran theology is that all grace comes to us mediately, that is, through means (by which we normally are talking about the Word and Sacraments). The notion that God would show Himself immediately, that is apart from such means, they would consider anathema. Yet I have witnessed people who appear to be very much in contact with Jesus directly through visualization, and to benefit greatly from the contact.

How do I balance that? I begin by taking the posture that my assumptions are not the only possibility. I continue by insisting that God does not have to act in any way by which I describe or define Him. I will hold fast to the premise that God does work through means, and put my primary focus on Word and Sacrament. I will allow that the Spirit has the freedom in my life to do what the Spirit chooses to do. (That last one sounds even to my ear a little presumptuous, as if the Spirit is waiting for my “Okay” before the Spirit can do anything, which would be complete nonsense).

The image that comes to us in today’s First Lesson and Holy Gospel comes from agriculture (one of the Bible’s prime motifs). God announces through Ezekiel that He will plant a tree. Jesus talks about the Kingdom as a mustard seed, and as other seeds sown. I need to jump in right there to underscore that Jesus is not talking about your faith needing to be like a mustard seed (He does say that, but elsewhere); here He is speaking of the Kingdom of God. The message is that the Kingdom gets planted and grows.

I haven’t had a vegetable garden in quite some time (since we moved to Macedonia we have discovered that deer are far more formidable garden enemies than the few aphids and occasional groundhog or rabbit we faced in Euclid — although the clay soil there was far worse). But I do recall that there was a lot of work involved in getting a good garden to grow.

When we lived in New York, our neighbor across the street would come over with his tractor and plow and disk the garden, then our neighbor down the road would come in with his Rototiller to smooth out the soil and till in some fertilizer; all I had to do was stick my finger in the ground, drop in a seed, and step back (now that's gardening!). Yet, even in that idyllic setting, there was constant weeding, mulching, attention to insects, and watering, and then the arduous chore of harvesting (yes, I know: How hard was my life?) With whatever work Kristine and I would invest, there was one thing we could not do — we could not make anything grow. This is the truth every gardener has to confront

At best — at best! — you can prepare the ground for growth to happen. Even then, you may — again I repeat “may!” — see a harvest. There are so many factors beyond your control: An early or late frost; a dry spell; too little rain or too much rain; a hailstorm; etc. But the most important item of all is this: God and God alone can make things grow.

This applies to growth in the Kingdom, as well.

God insists through Ezekiel that He will do the planting and directly handle the growth of His people. In part, God is so insistent on this because those who were supposed to be tending to His flock — the rulers, and especially the priesthood — had become corrupt and uncaring.

Jesus then takes it further. In two parables in today's Gospel, He sets forth some key understandings. You cannot explain how the Gospel works in any one individual. For instance, you can proclaim the Good News to someone a dozen, twenty, fifty times, and there is little or no response. Another person comes along and speaks a word of Good News and that person you had been trying to reach is totally transformed. “*Unfair!*” you want to cry; “*That's the ways things are,*” comes the reply. Jesus says, “*when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.*” When it is time, it is time; it has nothing to do with what is fair for you; it has to do with what is right for the Kingdom.

For all the mystery, the Kingdom does grow. Like a mustard seed, Jesus insists — from very small beginnings to major plant, large enough to house birds. In the earliest records of the Church — the Book of the Acts of the Apostles — there is found tremendous growth — 5,000 one day, 3,000 the next, whole villages, entire households. The Gospel spread across the Mediterranean basin — across Northern Africa, across Asia Minor, as far north as the Black Sea, across Europe as far east as England, out into the west to India . . . all within a single generation. As Mark is writing his Gospel, this phenomenal outreach is going on.

The question arises: “*Why are we not seeing such fantastic growth today?*” Some would argue that the Gospel has already gone out to the corners of the earth, or, as Jesus commanded, “*to the uttermost parts of the earth,*” so the task is completed. First, we are aware of hundred of thousands of people groups who have never heard the Good News, because nobody who speaks their language has been trained yet to bring it to them. Second, look around this world, this nation, this region and tell me that the Gospel has permeated what we see going on.

Obviously, the Gospel has not been proclaimed everywhere (and even if it had, there are succeeding generations for whom we need to ensure it continues to be passed along). So, “*Why are we not seeing such fantastic growth today?*”

There are likely many causal and contributing factors: 1) We (the Church) got lazy. 2) We got sucked up in secular thought patterns, and so lost our zeal for this Good News. 3) Some figured they had done enough, and stopped. 4) Some became concerned about how their faith would appear to others, and modified their behaviors as a result. 5) Some have bought into the notion that this a job for professionals, and not something they have any responsibility to pursue. And 6) Some just don’t think they can do it.

So listen to St. Paul (from today’s Second Lesson): “*For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might*

live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.”

Does the love of Christ urge you on? If not, why not? If so, to do what? Are you convinced that He died for all? Do all whom you know hear that from you? How much of your life is lived for self and how much is lived for Him? Those, by the way, are “weeding” and “watering” kinds of questions. They arise out of a very proper New Testament understanding. If something is true, then certain things should follow as a result. But this we know: what is true may not for us be real.

That brings me back to the mediate/immediate grace position I shared a while ago. A lot of what we say and do in Church — in our worship, our teaching, our fellowship, our service — arises out of the left brain. But relationships grow out of right-brain engagement. That’s true of our relationships with family and friends, with fellow-members, with acquaintances. It is equally true of our relationship with God. If all we have as a relationship with God is a set of propositions we agree to be true, what kind of relationship is that?

That would be akin to saying that my relationship with my wife consists in knowing her birth date, place of birth, dress size, shoe size, color preference, and brand of deodorant and toothpaste — all of it useful information, but not very relationally formative. What forms relationships is sharing — thoughts, feelings, hurts, joys, sorrows, victories, defeats, hopes, dreams, visions. All of that is really shaped in our creative, intuitive, feeling-sensitive right brains. We need to feed the right brain more — and come truly to know God and not just know about God.

If you haven’t read the prophets of the Old Testament much (or lately, or at all), get in touch with them. Set yourself the discipline of reading from the prophets every day. What you will begin to uncover is something called “the prophetic imagination” — these human instruments of God had their thinking shaped by the Holy Spirit so they could begin to “see” what others could not.

We each could use a little of that ourselves. Such insight comes from engaging in disciplines — I’ve listed a set of them at the end. Step into them . . . jump into them . . . ease into them . . . touch a toe into them . . . but start working on your prophetic imagination.

Dr. Siang-Yang Tan writes: *“God purposes that we ‘be conformed to the likeness of his Son’ (Rom.8:29). He wants us to walk in the Spirit, day by day, year after year, for a lifetime, to be built up ‘until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph.4:13,15). Our deepest longing can be met only through relationship with Jesus, through conformity of our hearts and minds to his life and character. Jesus Christ is the great ‘Good News.’ He is the answer to the deepest cries of the human heart — the cry for purpose in an empty existence, the cry for love and acceptance in an age of selfishness, the cry for freedom when human oppression abounds on every side. All of our human cries are at bottom a cry for God, and Jesus is the answer because he alone, by his living presence among us, has the power to change us. Becoming more like Jesus is becoming our true selves. The greatest sign and wonder the world can see is the transformation of people into his likeness”* (Disciplines of the Holy Spirit, p. 223).

He plants the seed here and now . . . he will tend that root and seedling and nurture it into the strong bush he intends for you to become. He invites you to position yourself to be drawn into His embrace.

Amen.

Spiritual Disciplines

Drawing Near to God: Disciplines of Solitude

Solitude and Silence

Listening and Guidance

Prayer and Intercession

Study and Meditation

Yielding to God: Disciplines of Surrender

Repentance and Confession

Yielding and Submission

Fasting

Worship

Reaching Out to Others: Disciplines of Service

Fellowship

Simplicity

Service

Witness

Drawn from Dr. Siang-Yang Tan and Dr. Douglas H. Gregg. *Disciplines of the Holy Spirit: How to Connect to the Spirit's Power and Presence*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.