

“The Seed Sprouts and Grows...By Itself”

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” (Mark 4:26-27).

If you’ve ever had a friend or family member walk away from their faith; if you’ve ever felt like your giving, or serving, or witness wasn’t making a difference; if you’ve ever thought that the simple message of the Gospel wasn’t enough; if you’ve ever struggled with any of these thoughts or feelings...then today’s reading is for you.

Mark includes 14 parables in his Gospel, and almost every one of them can be found in Matthew or Luke or both...*almost*. The parable that opens today’s text is one exception. Here, we find a parable from Jesus that is exclusive to Mark, and what Jesus teaches us in this parable is a shocking truth, and one that leaves us scratching our heads at just how revolutionary God’s kingdom really is. Jesus tells this unique story about the kingdom of God in three simple verses, and He begins with the image of a man who scatters seed on the ground.

Unlike “The Parable of the Sower” which we find in the preceding verses, here Jesus makes no mention of the soil quality or the hungry birds or the choking thorns. This parable’s sole focus is *the seed* – the seed that “sprouts and grows” without any attention or effort from the sower, but completely “by itself” in a way that can only be described as miraculous. Now, as we consider the meaning of this parable, it’s important to note that the phrase “by itself”, which appears in verse 28, is a translation of a Greek word that is used only one other time in the New Testament. The word is “automate.” From it, we get our word “automatic” and, in addition to its use in today’s reading, the only other time we see it is in a story from the book of Acts where an angel of the Lord appears in Peter’s locked prison cell, causes Peter’s chains to fall off, and then escorts Peter past two guard posts to the main gate that secured Herod’s prison. And here, Luke writes, “When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city...and it opened for them *of its own accord*” (Acts 12:10). “Of its own accord” or “by itself” are phrases that indicate an action that is unaided by human effort and unexplained by human reason, and this phrase “by itself” is exactly how Jesus describes the seed that “sprouts and grows.”

And this is how the kingdom of God is! You see, God has promised that He works through His Word – even when what we see looks broken, even when things appear hopeless, even when God seems silent. In today’s epistle lesson Paul writes, “we walk by faith, not by sight” and, as powerful as these words are, the truth is, we don’t want to walk by faith, and we have a desperate, innate desire to take control and see what’s going on. So instead of walking by faith and trusting in God’s promise we stress out, we blame others, we take credit, we measure progress, we add our two cents and ultimately we turn into the judge and we write people off. And when we do this – when we put ourselves in the middle of the equation and insist on engineering the kingdom *we* want – we completely miss out on the miracle of the kingdom of God!

The beautiful, radical and humbling nature of this text is the truth that God is working salvation in the simplest and most surprising ways, and, most of the time, we have no idea what’s happening. Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.” And it happens all “by itself!”

Harold Buls writes, “This parable should cause us to preach the Gospel faithfully, without worry, and in all patience.” James echoes this statement when he writes, “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:7-8). And so, no matter what we see or think or feel, *we live by faith*, trusting that God will keep His promise, and that the Word of the Lord will accomplish its saving purpose *by itself, of its own accord*, and the results will have an eternal value.

This message couldn't be more timely for us because, today, we will extend into our community with our annual Block Party and meet people from our neighborhood, and this week, over 150 children will come to Emmanuel for Vacation Bible School, and the truth is that these people may never become members of our congregation, or attend to our school, or give a penny in the offering plate and yet, this week, they will hear about Jesus from us and a seed will be planted...*and the kingdom of God is like this!*

The “kingdom of God” is not a place; it is not an earthly institution or a political movement. The kingdom of is located wherever God is at work, and the place God promises to work is in His Word. My friends, we have been promised that the Word is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). That it does not return empty (Isaiah 55:10–11) and Jesus Himself has told us that His words are “spirit and life” (John 6:63).

The kingdom of God is where Christ is present and, through His Word and in His Sacraments, that's exactly where Jesus has promised to be with us, and, wherever He is, the seed is planted and all by itself, it brings a harvest. We are sowers of seed and, as we go and make disciples; as we baptize and teach; as we reach out with the love of Christ to all people; God is doing a miraculous work – even when we can't see it! Even when a loved one seems to have rejected his faith; even when the world around us seems to be spiraling out of control; even when the Word of God seems powerless change any of it.

Our job is not to make the seed sprout and grow, and *we don't save anybody*, that happens through the power of the Holy Spirit. Instead, the job for which God has commissioned and prepared us is to share the Gospel faithfully, without worry, and in all patience, knowing that in the message of *Christ crucified for us*, sins are forgiven; fear is replaced by peace; death is replaced by life; and heaven is our future.

In this life, the kingdom of God will always appear insignificant, irrelevant, and incapable of great things. But through the seed of the Word, the Holy Spirit is at work creating new hearts and strengthening faith and helping us to love each other from this very day until we go to heaven. That's the seed at work, and, today, this seed is being planted, and God has promised us that it will grow. In fact, He says, this seed will “grow up and become larger than all the garden plants and put out large branches” (Mark 4:32). “And,” God promises, that “under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it” (Ezekiel 17:23-24). This is the promise of the Lord...and, guess what, He will do it all by Himself. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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