

### “God’s Kingdom Grows”

I’m not a farmer, and I’ve never been one. I have done a bit of gardening, but I don’t grow much food now. No, I used to do more of that when I lived in places where rain falls on a much more frequent basis. Tucson has other charms. And, though it surprises some, if you get out of the city, and not necessarily very far, you certainly do find farms in Arizona. I recently read an article about the high quality cotton that is grown around the state, and I’ve seen a few fields of it myself.

I don’t need to be a farmer, and most of us don’t need to be farmers because we live at a time when agricultural technologies allow farmers to grow more than ever before. And that means that fewer farmers can still grow enough to feed many people.

That wasn’t always the case. In some cultures and at many times in history, people were much more familiar with farming. That doesn’t mean that everybody needed to farm, but more people did, and more people were involved in the process and knew others who were involved in it.

At the time when Jesus lived in Israel, certainly not everyone was a farmer. But we get the impression from the way that Jesus spoke and taught that many of the people were very familiar with farming. They knew about planting crops. They knew about the patience it took to await the necessary growth, and the reliance of so many on the rains falling at the proper times. They knew about gathering in a harvest and bundling up worthless weeds to be burned in the fire.

So it’s no surprise that Jesus spoke to them about things that they knew. Jesus taught the people many things about God and the way that God works by making comparisons to farming. Jesus spoke many agriculture based parables, where he took a point about something that people knew, like planting seeds, and used it to make a point that they otherwise wouldn’t have known. He used their everyday experiences to teach them spiritual truths.

This morning we have before us two of these parables that Jesus taught. They are connected to each other not only by the subject matter of planting seeds, but also by the general point Jesus is driving home about the kingdom of God. Now, it’s important for us to remember right away what is meant by the kingdom of God. It is not a specific location or a territory on earth. It is a spiritual matter. The kingdom of God is the ruling activity of God in the hearts of people through faith. Many of Jesus’ parables began in similar ways to these two, when Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is like...”

In the first case this morning, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like seed scattered on the ground. This is very similar to another parable of Jesus, in which seed is scattered around. That parable is the one referenced by our stained glass window, which is also printed on the worship folder this morning. We learned about that parable on Wednesday in our Vacation Bible School. The point of this parable is that the Word of God is received in different ways when it is heard and taught.

In this parable, the seed still represents the Word of God, but this story only speaks of one sort of reception, the sort where the Word takes root and grows. Hidden at first, then little by little it grows from the small seed into a large plant. Finally it is ready to be harvested, and so it is. God’s Kingdom grows. God’s Word is planted into the hearts and lives of people. Just like the farmer has no special power to make the seed grow, so the power of God’s Word is in that Word.

Just like the growing of the seed, it happens whether we notice it or not. At times it is hidden in the ground. At times its growth is slow even to the point that it is imperceptible. But ultimately, it grows and matures. It bears fruit. God’s kingdom grows. It grows in the hearts of people. It grows steadily, producing fruits of faith. It grows in us.

Yes, the seed of God’s Word, and specifically the gospel, the good news that Jesus is our Savior, has been planted into our hearts. Our faith grows as it is nourished through Word and sacrament, not by any other

efforts that we might undertake. This parable reminds us that we need to depend on the power that God has given to his Word. While at times we might not notice our own spiritual growth, it is happening. Week after week. That's how God's Word works in us.

That's why it is so important for us to listen. That's why it is so valuable for us to gather together around the Word. That's why it is so essential that even the youngest among us are given opportunities to hear God's Word on a regular basis. That's why we devote a week to sharing the Word with children at our Vacation Bible School. And some days, as our volunteer teachers will attest, it is hard to see the fruits of faith. Sometimes the children are unruly and undisciplined. But we trust the power of God's Word, not to make a magical transformation according to our hopes and intentions, but to grow in the hearts and in the lives of these young people as they become more mature Christians.

And just as that Word planted in our hearts grows, so it grows in the hearts of others. The second parable for us to consider today puts the focus on the wider aspect of God's kingdom, the big picture. God's kingdom grows not only in us, but also through us.

This parable employs the picture of a mustard seed, a very small seed, one of the smallest that would have been planted in gardens of that time. But once planted, the seed yielded a large plant. In fact, Jesus describes the large size of this plant by mentioning birds that perch in its shade. And that's exactly the point. It starts so very small and ends up with something much greater.

So, too, God's kingdom begins with just one man, the God-man Jesus Christ. He is found in the humblest and lowliest of situations and circumstances. He is persecuted and ultimately executed. Yet from this exceedingly small beginning something great has grown and continues to grow. He rose from the dead to assure his followers of the forgiveness of sins. He sent his Holy Spirit to remind his followers of all that he did and to empower them to share his message. And they have. The small seed has sprouted and grown. Its branches continue to reach farther and farther.

God's kingdom continues to grow in this outward way today. It grows when believers share the good news that they have learned and that they love. It grows as sinners despair of their own worth and worthiness and repent of their sins. It grows when they find in Jesus their Savior who takes away their sins and gives them his own righteousness.

It's not hard, is it, to see the connection between these two parables? They both emphasize the growth that occurs in the kingdom of God. The outward growth of the kingdom, like the growing mustard seed, would not be possible apart from the growth of the Word in individual hearts. And so God's kingdom grows not only in us, in our own hearts, it also grows through us as we are involved in sharing God's Word with those around us. In fact, that sharing is one of the fruits of faith that we are reminded of by the ripening grain in the first parable.

This fruit of faith comes in many forms. We are a part of the growth of God's kingdom as we share his Word personally, and as we tell other about what we believe, invite them to church or Bible study. We're also involved in this growth as we support missionaries with our offerings and as we gather as a congregation to put our shared resources to use in this way. We're involved in this growth as we pray, like we do in the Lord's Prayer, that God's kingdom would come.

Just as before, we may rarely if ever notice the growth. This parable is not specifically about the size of our congregation or about the number of people in church on a given Sunday. It is about a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom hidden in the hearts of people. Sure, at times we may notice and celebrate that growth, but there are other times when we'll simply do the work God has put before us and trust that he will accomplish his purposes.

And one day the harvest will come. God will gather all his own into his eternal heavenly kingdom. Then we will know the full extent of his kingdom. Then we will be fully aware of the fruits of faith born from our own lives and many other lives. Then we will rejoice in the sight of what we now know only by faith, that God's kingdom is growing in us and through us.

The text: Mark 4:26–34 (NIV84)

<sup>26</sup> He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup> As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup> Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?

<sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. <sup>32</sup> 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.”

<sup>33</sup> With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup> He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.