

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
June 20, 2021  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church  
Mark 4:26-34

## **Lord of the Church**

### **Mark 4:26–34 (NIV84)**

*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.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Some of you have noticed a raised bed garden recently constructed in the parsonage yard. My dad, brother and I put it together. We designed it. We got the materials. We dug the post holes, screwed together the boards, and filled it with dirt. My family dug in the dirt and planted seeds. We covered the seeds with dirt and watered the seeds. And now there are plants growing in the garden because of all the design and thought and hard work that we put into it.

Or, the seeds grew because God made them grow. Maybe a botanist could explain it scientifically but somehow God designed plants to produce seeds that will grow when placed into the ground. The human gardener can do some things to give that seed the best chance to germinate and grow. Good soil, water and a sunny spot help. But I cannot make the seed grow. It will either grow or it will not. The design and power to grow is in the seed.

We are in the middle of a series on Jesus as Lord. He is Lord of the Sabbath and Lord over Satan. In the parables before us today we see that Jesus is Lord of the Church. When I read these parables again you will probably notice that Jesus does not speak about the Church. Instead he tells us about the kingdom of God. Those in the kingdom of God are those ruled by Christ through faith. Those in the Church are the believers in Christ. The Church and the kingdom of God are the same. So Jesus is the Lord of God’s kingdom, which is the Church.

As Lord of the Church, Jesus is the one to grow the Church. He gives growth in the number of people in his Church and growth in faith to the members of his Church. But this does not leave us out completely. We, as members of Christ’s Church, plant the seeds.

### **Jesus Grows His Church**

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<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.”*

The kingdom of God grew rapidly in the years after Christ’s resurrection. 3,000 were added to the Church on Pentecost. The apostles took the Gospel to Asia Minor, to Greece, to Italy, to Africa, and east, perhaps as far as India. These apostles gave up family and home and often their lives to bring the gospel to others and the church grew like that mustard seed, from something very small to something very large. When the Holy Christian Church grows in numbers or when a local Christian congregation grows in numbers, there is often the temptation for the human gardeners to take some credit.

The Church grew because of the apostles, because of their dedication, because of the way they presented the gospel, because of their gifts and talents. The local congregation grew because of a dynamic pastor or amazing leadership. This kind of sinful pride in human efforts takes away the glory from Jesus. Christ is Lord of the Church, not us. Christ gives the gospel its power to save, not us.

Paul and the others did not take credit for growing the Church. For they did not use wise and persuasive words but instead relied on the foolishness of the cross, a message of a crucified and risen Savior. Christ, as Lord of the Church, has determined that the message of Christ crucified is the means by which he will grow his Church. Therefore, we praise Christ as Lord when anyone is added to the Holy Christian Church and/or to our local church through the gospel in Word and sacrament.

But what about when our local church is not growing? What about when a local church is shrinking? The temptation is to fall into despair and think that it is up to us to grow the church. Some have fallen into such despair and abandoned the use of Christ’s gospel to grow the church when the numbers are not increasing. Instead, they turn to other means. Maybe it is making the church service more entertaining to draw more people. Maybe it is leaving out certain doctrines of the Bible that are troubling to people. Maybe it is making people promises of earthly benefits of following Jesus and downplaying the eternal and spiritual. If we ever have the thought that the gospel seed of Christ is just not working, we are in danger of pushing Jesus off the throne as Lord of the Church. We are telling Jesus that we could do a better job than he is doing.

Each day after we planted seeds in our new garden, I would look and see nothing had changed. It was just dirt day after day. But one day about a week after planting, there was something green growing out of the ground. Just like in Jesus’ parable, the seed sprouted while I was sleeping. But some seeds never sprouted. Though they were from the same batch of seeds, in the same soil, with the same moisture and the same sun, some sprouted and some didn’t. I can’t take credit for the seeds that grew and I won’t fall into despair about the seeds that didn’t. In a similar way, we leave the growth of God’s kingdom, Christ’s Church, in the hands of the Lord of the Church. Especially in a local church, we praise the Lord when it grows and pray to the Lord when it doesn’t. But no matter what, we keep using the gospel seed he has given us to use. For the seed of the gospel has the power to grow in itself.

## **We Plant Seeds**

As members of the Holy Christian Church through faith in Christ, we do have a small part to

play in the growth of God's kingdom. We plant gospel seeds.

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The Lord of the Church used some other human to plant the seed of the gospel in you. Our parents brought us to the baptismal font as a child and the Lord used the gospel connected to the water to grow faith in us. A friend told us the good news that Jesus forgave all our sins through his sacrificial death and the Lord used that gospel seed to create faith in us. Someone planted the seed and the Lord of the Church brought us into his kingdom of faith.

Just think about yourself right now. Jesus' parables talk about a plant that matures - *first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head*. The Lord wants your faith to grow and mature. If a believer stops using the gospel, he or she is disconnecting from the source of power and life that brought them to faith in Christ. The seed of the gospel continues to be the life of the Christian or the person's faith will wither and die. In our sinful nature, we have all kinds of excuses for stopping or slowing down our use of the gospel.

I'm too tired....I have too much to do at work....My spouse isn't interested in the Bible or church....My children make it difficult to listen to the gospel at church or read it at home....I've been confirmed already....and on and on the excuses go. And weaker and weaker faith becomes until it dies. For we cannot maintain faith in the Lord of the Church apart from the means he provides, the gospel in Word and sacraments. Trust the Lord and make use of his gospel to receive his forgiveness again again.

Now think of others. Just as we sometimes fail to use the gospel in our own lives, we also fail to plant the gospel seed in the lives of others. In the parables a man scatters seed on the ground and the mustard seed is planted. We have the seed of the gospel. We have the Bible. We have the good news of a Savior. We could just hold onto these seeds and hope someone else plants the gospel in our friends and neighbors. But that would be selfish of us and unloving towards others. Instead we plant the seed. But remember that you are not the Lord of the Church. It is not up to you to make the seed grow and create faith in Christ. Plant the seed and the Lord makes it grow.

And just as garden seeds don't germinate and sprout immediately, the gospel seeds you plant may take weeks, months and decades to sprout into faith. The pressure is not on you to make faith happen. Just plant the seed. You don't have to have a well polished evangelism presentation in order to plant the gospel seed. When we go door to door in our neighborhood, we say only a couple of sentences. "Hi, I'm Matt and we are from Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church. We believe that God loves the world and sent Jesus to die on the cross to forgive everyone's sins and give eternal life. We'd like to invite you to..." Plant the seed and let the Lord take it from there.

Look for those opportunities to plant the gospel seed when talking with friends or chatting online. Drop in a comment about how a Bible passage you read recently helped you with something. Or tell how the worship service helped you that week. Or offer to pray to Jesus for someone and open the door to talking to them more about the Lord of the Church. The days of Peter and Paul going into the marketplaces and synagogues to proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior to crowds of people are mostly gone. Today it is one on one. As members of Christ's church we plant the seed and Christ brings about the growth. For he is the Lord of the Church. Amen.