

6 July 2003  
Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

“A Kingdom Only God Can Grow”

Text: Mark 4:26-34 (Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Cor. 5:1-10)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Holy Gospel this evening, we heard about how the Kingdom of God grows; about how the Church grows. From a small seed, to a large tree. Miraculously. The Word of God is like the seeds that we plant in the ground. They know *how* to grow, and *when* to grow, even though we do not know how they know these things. But God knows. And by His hand not only was the world created, but by His hand it continues. Plants and seeds and rain in their seasons; sun and moon and stars in their courses. The work of God, and His work alone – without any help from us.

And so it is also with His Church. We may think we know how to grow the Church, with methods and programs and processes . . . but no. The truth is that we know just as much about how to make the Church grow as we know about how to make seeds grow. We can care for the seeds, but we can't make them grow. Only God can do that. It is His Kingdom, His Church, and its growth is His work alone. . . . And while that may, at times, seem like a very frustrating thing, it is a very good thing. Because if it were up to us? Well, to put it bluntly, there would be no Church.

Martin Luther knew this. And so he had a prayer he would pray, to remind him of this, to keep things in perspective:

Lord God, You have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in Your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon You: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.

Do not underestimate just how miraculous a thing it is that there is a Christian Church in the world today. From the beginning God has been planting the seed of His Word into the world and into the hearts of men, and from the beginning the devil, the world, and our sinful nature have been trying to kill it. And yet it grows. Even though its leaders have been frail, sinful men, it grows. For consider, briefly, the history of the Church, and how

from the very beginning, God, and His Word, and His people have been attacked. And yet the Word of the Lord grows. The Church grows. We know not how. It is God's work, it must be! And His work alone. For consider . . .

In the beginning, Adam and Eve decided that they liked Satan's word and advice better than God's Word.

After receiving the promise of a Saviour, Cain kills his brother Abel.

The people at Babel decided the way to Heaven was not by faith and worship but to build a tower up to Heaven.

By the time of Noah, the Church was down to only eight people – **but still the Church survived and grew.**

Abraham, lacking faith, lies to protect his hide. Jacob deceives to get what he wants. And Joseph is sold into slavery.

God used Moses to bring His people out of their slavery in Egypt, and they thanked Him by worshipping a golden calf.

As the people then wandered in the wilderness, God was not so much remembered for His mighty deeds and rescuing the people from slavery – He was instead grumbled against.

Then once they got to the Promised Land, the people of Israel thanked God for His goodness by pioneering the idea of "blended worship" – blending the worship of the false gods and idols of Canaan with the Word of God and the worship of the Tabernacle. **But still the Church survived and grew.**

Then Israel asked for, and got, kings. King Saul was paranoid and dabbled in sorcery. King David was a liar, an adulterer, and a murderer. King Solomon introduced multi-religious tolerance so that all his wives could worship however and whoever they wanted. And those were the good kings!

And so the Kingdom of Israel was divided, defeated, and overrun by its enemies and the Temple was destroyed.

The prophets didn't fair much better. Elijah was so dejected at one point that he thought he was the only Christian left. Jeremiah's calls for repentance were met with laughter and scorn. **But still the Church survived and grew.**

Then the Son of God came into the world, and His parents Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt for their lives.

When Jesus begins His ministry He is rejected and called possessed by Satan. He is opposed at every step. He is crucified as a criminal. He entrusts His Church to 12 nobodies, all of whom (except for one) are soon killed for the Word of God they speak. **But still the Church survived and grew.**

Soon after that heresies and sects enter the Church. The doctrine of the Trinity is attacked. The truth of the Son of God become man in Jesus is attacked.

A new religion, Islam, arises, and Christians are put to the sword – a persecution that continues in many parts of the world still today.

Ethnic differences and hatred result in Christians fighting against Christians, and the Church begins to split apart. **But still the Church survived and grew.**

Then the grace and free forgiveness of God is attacked and replaced with works righteousness – the idea that we can earn salvation and forgiveness ourselves. Men begin to doubt that the Scriptures are are God's Word. Human reason and science are exalted in their place. Evolution and cloning replace a loving Creator.

God is not supreme, man is supreme. There is nothing we can't do if we put our mind to it. There is no one truth. We all worship the same God. **But still the Church survived and grew.**

Churches are growing smaller. God's Word doesn't work anymore. Give the people what they want. Entertainment and excitement instead of truth and grace. Love and getting along is more important than the truth.

Now good is called evil and evil is called good. Abortion, mercy killing, homosexuality. Brothers killing brothers, mothers their children, children their parents. This is called progress. **But still the Church survives and grows.**

Airplanes fly into buildings. People blow themselves up in order to kill other people. Clergy scandals, betrayal, sin. Where is God? God is dead. God doesn't care. **But still the Church survives and grows.**

It is nothing short of miraculous that we are here today; that there is a Church on earth.

It is true, what we heard: ***“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.”*** We know not how! But one thing is for sure: it is certainly not because of us or anything we have done. Our human history is filled with rebellion, self-glorification, and destruction. We go our own way. We seek to please ourselves. We twist the Word of God to fit our own agendas. We think we know better, and know best. We make excuses and plead extenuating circumstances. There has been no time since the fall when God and His Word have not been attacked and tread underfoot! . . .

**And yet the Church is here, and the Word of God grows.** Despite enemies from within and without, the gates of hell have not prevailed against the Church. Babies are being baptized and made children of God. The pure Word of God is being proclaimed. The body and blood of the Lord given. The creeds are professed, sins are confessed and forgiven. And though we know not how, and might we say *against all odds*, there is a harvest being prepared. The Word of God is working, and growing. We know not how, but that you are here today is testimony that it is.

We need to hear this truth, that we don't lose faith. For if we look to ourselves, and what we can do, and how well we can defend the Church and God and His Word, we will despair because we cannot even convince or take care of ourselves! The seductive ways of the world we have followed! The deceptive voice of Satan we have believed! The glorifying flattery of the world we have accepted! And if we cannot even defend and protect ourselves from these things and resist them, how can we expect to defend and protect the Church? . . . No, it is not us. It is the powerful and miraculous Word of God that is working. Or to quote Martin Luther again:

“And while I slept . . . or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends . . . the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. . . . I did nothing; I let the Word do its work.”

And therefore we do not lose faith. As St. Paul wrote in the Epistle that we heard, we may indeed be groaning here for a while. We are burdened here for a while. But we are always of good courage. For God has given us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee. Our guarantee that He is working. Our guarantee that He is with us. Our guarantee that our sins and failures and doubts are forgiven. Our guarantee that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. So we do not lose faith, because it is not up to us. We do not lose faith, because God is working. We do not lose faith, because we have God's promise, which is the most sure and true thing on this earth! We have His promise, that because He chose us, He will keep us. Because He justified us, He will glorify us. Because He died for us, He will raise us, with Himself, to eternal life in Heaven.

And it is the prophet Ezekiel that gave us a beautiful picture of this working of God. Listen again, in light of all that we have just considered:

Thus says the Lord God: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it."

And when God's only-begotten Son hung on the tree of the cross, high atop Mt. Calvary, **He did it.** And from that small branch, a seemingly insignificant moment in history, one crucifixion among many thousands, a Kingdom grows. And the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, dead and buried in the ground, like a seed has risen and grows. And His Kingdom, His Church, is still growing. In Him, we have found rest and shade, food and nourishment. It is His work, not ours. His Word, not ours. His power, not ours. All the other kingdoms of this world, all the other trees, will dry up and die. But not this one. For it is a Kingdom not of this world.

This weekend we celebrated the founding and birthday of our nation. 227 years – which seems like a long time, but which in reality is quite brief. How much longer will our nation last? We do not know. But our hope is not in this nation, but in a Kingdom far greater. A Kingdom that will last forever. A Kingdom that can never be defeated. And when this world and its kingdoms pass away, it is in His branches that we will be found – safe and secure.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.