

2 July 2006
Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“God’s Green Thumb”

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

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

If it were up to me, all the children who came to our Vacation Bible School this week – and their families! – would come to our church.

If it were up to me, all the people we met at the Viva Vienna festival, and who we will meet this Tuesday at the Fourth of July festival, would come to our church.

If it were up to me, all the people we meet canvassing would come to our church. And all the visitors who visit our church would come back every week. And our church would grow and produce an abundant harvest!

If it were up to me.

But perhaps my goals there are too ambitious. So let’s make them a little smaller.

If it were up to me, you would all have a faith so strong it could never be shaken.

If it were up to me, all the folks who have fallen away would come back, and all who are experiencing trials and troubles would be made whole and healthy once again.

If it were up to me, I would always have the answers to your questions, and always know the right thing to say when you come to me for comfort or advice.

If it were up to me, you and our church wouldn’t have any problems – no doubts, no fears, no crises, no difficulties, no knock-the-wind-out-of-you surprises. Only joy and peace and all things pleasant and nice.

If it were up to me, wouldn’t our church be great?

Well actually, no. Because even though *I* may think such a church would be great, and

you may think such a church would be great, and *the world* may think such a church would be great – the truth is, we don't know what makes a church great. It is not up to me . . . or you. It is *God's* Church, and only He can grow it. Only He knows how.

And the good news that we heard today is that He is. He is working in the world, He is working in the Church, He is working in your friends and family, and He is working in you. Even if you can't see it. Even if you don't know it. Even if it seems as if the very opposite of growth is happening. It is God's Church, and **God has a green thumb.**

Which means that God knows when we need peace, and He also knows when we need struggle in order to grow. He grants growth *and* He prunes. He knows when to make the sun shine, when to make the rain fall, and yes, even *when to apply the manure!* He makes the seed of His Word grow in His time, not our time. For His time is the right time. *We* may want it to grow sooner, and faster, and stronger, and bigger. But we cannot do it. ***We know not how.*** But He whose seed it is, can. And His promise to you today is that ***"I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it."***

And do we need that promise! For I'm afraid that we as Christians, and as the Church, have lost much of our confidence in the Lord and in His work these days. We think we know better. We think we can do it. Or worse, we think we *have* to do it, and have a certain degree of success, and convert a certain number of people. And then everything seems to be a crisis. We get impatient. We're always worrying. How many run from one gimmick to the next, one slogan to the next, one program to the next. There are the continual barrages to extend the kingdom, grow the kingdom, further the kingdom. Be this, be that! Do this, do that! Go out and save some souls! Be *on fire* for the Lord! Kyle and I heard a lot of that last weekend at our District Convention.

But I wonder. Whose kingdom are we building? How long can you be on fire before you just burn up or burn out? And you know it. When you're worried about a loved one, when you're in the midst of trials and struggles, when you've been trying so hard for so long, we get consumed . . . and *we forget the promise: "I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it."*

Did you notice how good that sounded? And not just to you and me, but to all of God's people, for that tendency to trust ourselves and *our* ways and *our* wisdom goes all the way back to the beginning. For all the way back to the beginning, we keep messing it up. For think back – from Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph: *did God not do it?* From Israel in slavery in Egypt, to the time of the Judges: *did God not do it?* From David to Solomon to the people of God hauled off into exile: *did God not do it?* From a small band of 12 apostles, through persecutions, to a little monk in Wittenberg: *did God not do*

it? And what about today? Is God not doing it? What credit can we take for being here? What credit can we take for this church? Did I give my children faith? Why are you here? Did God not do it? And will He not continue?

Now to say that is not an excuse for inaction or laziness, but **an invitation to faith**. To still go out canvassing, set up our booth at festivals, improve our web site, talk to our neighbors, visit all the people we can, pray for all the folks we can think of, have our Spanish Bible Study, make our CDs, sing at the Metro, talk to friends and neighbors, be there for each other, and more! God's promise is not a reason to stop all those things, but to do them *in faith*. To not get discouraged if we don't see the results, but to scatter the seed of God's Word, and let *Him* grant the growth. And He will. It's His Church, and God has a green thumb.

I guess the problem is that we're colorblind! And that God's green thumb doesn't always look so green to us. In fact, maybe sometimes it looks downright brown and dead! In us, in others, and in our Church. When we're going through struggles, when we see what's happening to others, when we see all the nonsense going on in the Church around the world today! . . . But you know, that's how it is with God's green thumb – He kills in order to make alive. We heard that from the prophet Ezekiel: ***“I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish.”*** And we see it on the cross, where the Son of God was put to death and then planted in the ground. I dare say that things never looked so dry and dead to the Apostles and for the Kingdom of God than that Saturday between Good Friday and Easter morning.

But from that tree of death, from that seed planted in the ground, came life. Life from the dead. And though it may have looked like only a tiny mustard seed in the course of world history at the time, in that dry Good Friday tree made green on Easter Sunday was packed the death of all and the life of the whole world, the entire forgiveness of every sin, the resurrection of all the dead, and the reconciliation of the world to God! You might not have been able to see it at the time, all may have looked dead and dry, but God was planting Paradise again. A new tree of life for the life of the world.

And so it is still today, in you and me and all wherein is planted the seed of God's Word. For where God plants His Word, He plants His cross. His death and resurrection. That He may bring low in order to raise up. That He may dry up in order to make green. That He may kill in order to give life. His life. Not ordinary life, but eternal life. That is why, as St. Paul says, ***“we walk by faith, not by sight.”*** For our sight is colorblind! Our sight may judge things dry and dead and lost. But faith trusts the promise of God. That things are not as they look, but as God says they are.

And God is working, and growing His Church. His ways may seem as small as a mustard seed to us, but do not be deceived. The water of Holy Baptism, the word of Holy Absolution, and the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion are giving life and granting growth. For in all these things is not *our* power, but the power of the Gospel, the power of God. The power of the death and resurrection of Jesus, forgiving sins, raising the dead, and giving faith. Faith to know it's not up to me. Faith to believe in *God's* green thumb. Faith to rely confidently on Him and His ways, to build His Church, **and to save me**. For only He can do it.

I think that was one of the great things about Martin Luther. How great was he? Father of the Reformation! **Nah**. Luther had a profound sense of his own non-necessity. He once remarked, "*While I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer, the gospel runs its course.*" That's faith. He could preach the Word and then cheerfully step down from the pulpit, take off his robes, and have a glass of Wittenberg beer confident that the Word is at work, doing its killing and making alive thing. No frenzy. No worry. He was active, but he knew who he was, a sinner. And he knew who God was, the Saviour. And so he lived in forgiveness, trusting not himself, but the Word to do its work. And so he could pray for hours a day, even when there was much work to do. And even have his little glass of Wittenberg beer in peace.

And you too. There is much to do and much to worry about in this world, but in the end, you cannot even save yourself, let alone others. But there is One who can, and who has! You have His forgiveness and life. He has planted His Word in your heart and made it grow. And He is keeping you. **You have His promise**. And though you may feel as small as a mustard seed in this world, and think that all that you can do is just as small – remember that that mustard seed that you have and that you scatter is one powerful seed! It is the Word and power of God to forgive sin and raise the dead. It is the Word and power of His cross. It is the Word and power of His love. So scatter it recklessly, sow it with joy, and at the end of the day, sit down and have your little glass of Wittenberg beer. Relax. Trust. Rest in the branches of the cross. Your Saviour is working. In you. In others. In the world. Doing all that is necessary. And all that we need.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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