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Pentecost 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“His Seed, His Kingdom, His Growth”

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

[This sermon is a reworking of a sermon I preached six years ago. I appreciated it as I reread it and since most of members weren't here six years ago to hear it the first time, I decided to use it as the basis for my preachment of these texts this year.]

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

You know, if it were up to me, all who visit our church would come back every week and become members. If it were up to me, all the people we met at the Viva Vienna festival, or who receive the door hangers we've been putting up, would come to our church. If it were up to me, all the people who join our church would never move away and leave us. If it were up to me, our church would have outgrown this building years ago, and we'd have our own place, and maybe even be outgrowing that! If it were up to me.

But maybe that's asking too much. Perhaps my goals are too ambitious. So let's make them a little smaller.

If it were up to me, all of you would have a faith so strong it could never be shaken. If it were up to me, all the folks who have fallen away from our church 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 just the right thing to say when you come to me for comfort or counsel. 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.

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.*

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. Or in

other words, it's 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 we heard today is that He is. Through the seed of His Word 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, if the growth is all underground. Even if you don't know how. Even if it seems as if the very opposite of growth is happening. It is *God's kingdom, God's Church, and He* is growing it.

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. 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, knows. And He can grant growth. And His promise to you today is that He will. For as the Lord said through the prophet Ezekiel: ***"I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it."***

And do we need that promise! For as Christians, and as the Church, how easy it is to lose our confidence in the Lord and in His Word. How easy to think that we know better, that we *can* do it, or worse, think that we *have* to do it. Through programs and methods and social sciences. Or, since our District Convention starts this week, by just getting the right people elected or the right resolutions passed. Those things aren't necessarily bad, but to rely on them . . . that's when doubt and worry and fear take over; that's when we become burdened and weary. And not only in the church, but in our lives as Christians. Because we've forgotten or lost confidence in His promise: ***"I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it."***

But did you notice how good that sounded? God is growing His church. And that's not just now, but think back through the history of God's people, all the way back to the beginning. We keep messing it up, but *did God not do it?* Did He not keep and preserve and grow His kingdom? 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 as prisoners of war: *did God not do it?* From a small band of 12 apostles, through persecutions and martyrs, to a little monk in Wittenberg: *did God not do it?* From communist countries that tried to stamp out the church but couldn't, to Muslim countries that now try to behead the church, but can't: *is God not doing it?* And still today: *is God not doing it?* For what credit can you take for being here, at this time, in this place? What credit can we take for this church? Did *I* give my children faith? *Did God not do it?* Is He not working? And will He not continue?

Now to say that is not an excuse for inaction or laziness on our part. To think that if

God's doing it, then we can just sit back and not do anything at all. No! Rather, it is *an invitation to live our lives and our vocations in faith*. To keep reaching out and doing all we can for each other, but to do what we do *in faith*. To not get discouraged if we don't see the results, but to scatter the seed of God's Word, and know that *He* will grant the growth. It's His Church, and He'll grow it.

I guess you could say that the reason we don't always believe that is that sin has made us spiritually colorblind. When we look around, we don't always see a kingdom of God that looks lush and green, but sometimes looks downright brown and dead. In us, in others, and in the 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; that's what we're going to see sometimes and the way it's going to seem sometimes, because *growth* for God starts with *death*. He kills *in order to make alive*. That's what we heard from the prophet Ezekiel in conjunction with God's promise: ***"I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish."*** And the foremost example of that is 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. He brings you low in order to raise you up. He dries you up in order to make you green. He kills in order to give life. That whatever in us is working against Him - our sin, our pride, our desire for self-sufficiency; our reliance on our numbers, our income, or our members; our desire to be the master of all that we have - be brought low, be dried up, and die, that we may be raised up to life in Him. And no 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 the work of God wrongly, and think things dry and dead and lost. But faith trusts the promise of God. That things are not as they look or seem, but are 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 Word of God you speak to others, 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 that what I see today may not be the way things are tomorrow. 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 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!

For that seed is the Word and power of God to forgive sin and raise the dead; the Word and power of the cross, the Word and power of His love. So scatter that seed 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. He promised.

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 through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.