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Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Wonderfully Unpredictable”

Text: Mark 4:26-34; 2 Corinthians 5:1-17

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

The kingdom of God is unpredictable. From our perspective, anyway. Not for God, of course. He knows all things. He’s in control. No curveballs that He’s unprepared for. It’s not that way for us. And *we usually don’t like that.*

Because that means I’m not in control. For to be in control means a predictable and desired outcome. Do this, you get that. Or if you don’t get your desired outcome, you fix it. When I wake up in the morning, I expect my coffee maker to work, my shower to be hot, and my internet to be available and fast. And if any of those things don’t work as I desire or predict, then neither do I! And if that’s true for these little things in my life, how much more for the big things, like the kingdom of God.

But the kingdom of God is unpredictable. That’s what Jesus is teaching in the parables we heard today. He said the kingdom of God is like scattering seed on the ground. We don’t know how that seed grows, or where, or how much harvest each seed will produce. It just does. And the kingdom of God is also like a mustard seed - in that little seeds don’t always grow little plants, and big seeds don’t always grow big plants. Sometimes you are surprised. Sometimes what you get is unexpected, and so unpredictable.

And as with the things in our lives, *we usually don’t like that.* Surprises are good, but not all the time. We want to be in control. *That we like.* And this is true even with the kingdom of God, with the Church, His kingdom of grace. And so we want to know: How do we make the church grow? What’s the formula? What do I have to do to get the desired and predictable outcome? Namely, the growth we want. So we see churches trying that. Copying what works for that church, following this trend, that fad, or those gimmicks, allowing the culture to come into the church, doing what , they think, will draw the people in, give them what they want. *Trying to control the outcome.*

But the kingdom of God is unpredictable. Some churches that do those things grow, and some do not. Is the reason that some do it well and some do not? Maybe, but that’s not always the case. I also know some churches who do no outreach into their communities at all and grow, and others that do a *ton* of outreach and do not. Why is that? And take our own congregation, our little church here, for an example, a case study.

We've been here over 20 years, are still small, and still don't have our own building. There are other churches that have started at the same time or more recently than us which are bigger and have their own buildings. Are they successful and we are not? And we faithful and they are not? Are they doing it right and we are not? Can we make such judgments? **Or is the kingdom of God just not predictable?**

Truth is, the kingdom of God **is not ours to grow**. Only Jesus can do that. He is in control, not us. And He grows His kingdom with small seeds and large seeds, small plants and big plants, great harvests and sometimes one soul at a time. And sometimes in ways quite unexpected and unpredictable. Like, why did God choose Jacob and not Esau? Jacob turned out not to be a paragon of virtue! And why did God choose David, the youngest of seven brothers? **Unpredictable.**

I don't think we usually think of sin this way, but maybe we should: that part of our fallen, sinful human nature is **the desire to be in control**; to control everything in my life and get my desired outcome. Not that being in control is always sinful. God has given that responsibility to some people for some things - and that's good. But my desire to control my life and everything in it - that leads away from God. That's the opposite of living by faith. It is living by sight. By my sight. By what looks right to me.

And then how I measure things is by what I want. And then who am I looking at? who am I looking to? Myself. My thoughts, my desires, what I do. And then what happens is that I either despair, grow prideful, or maybe get angry. Despair when things don't work out as I wanted, prideful when they do, or angry when my efforts are not rewarded. And none of that is good. *Especially* if what I thought and what I wanted really isn't good at all.

The alternative, then, is to **live by faith, not sight**. We heard that from the apostle Paul today in the Epistle. But to live by faith is to admit and acknowledge that I am not in control. It is to place the kingdom of God in Jesus' hands. Or, better to say, to leave it there. And that is then also to not look at *myself* - my thoughts, my desires, what I do - but to look at and look to Christ and Him crucified **and keep my eyes there**. Then instead of anger there is repentance, instead of pride there is humility, and instead of despair there is confidence. The confidence that the kingdom of God belongs to God, not to me. (Duh, right?) And that it is in better hands in His hands, not mine.

And it is also to admit and acknowledge that my judgment may not always be the right one, and that there are things happening that I do not know and cannot see. And that maybe my goals, desires, and expectations aren't the right ones either. For is a full church a healthy church? Is a full and large church a faithful church? Maybe. But maybe not.

Better then, is to live by faith. Faith in the words and promises of God. That what God has promised, He will do. That His every word will be fulfilled. We do what has been

given us to do, but the growth, the harvest, belongs to Him. And it may not be what we want, like, or think. **Unpredictable.**

But let's get back to the parables, starting with the mustard seed growing into the largest of all the garden plants. That small seed that the birds could easily eat becomes the large plant that they can nest in. If that is a parable of the kingdom of God, as Jesus said it was, then the largest plant that comes from the smallest seed **is a picture for us of the cross.** For Jesus was small like a mustard seed. He was at one time just a fertilized egg in His mother's womb, just like us. He was born in poverty, in a small town, and by and large unnoticed by the world which had far more important things to do than worry about another religious guy in a backwater country. And yet when Jesus was crucified and planted in the ground of the tomb, *He then grew* - He rose to life again and His cross became the largest and most important of all trees. And His kingdom, growing from that empty tomb and watered by His blood, *encompassed the world* and will last *to eternity.* **And who at the foot of the cross, would have predicted that?**

And through the centuries, the growth of the kingdom of God, the church, **has been unpredictable.** When persecuted, it grew stronger. It was pushed underground in the Soviet Union, only to later grow again. In the West it is shrinking and struggling, but in the global South it is growing. And in some Muslim countries, like Iran, it is sprouting up in many hearts. **Who would have predicted that?**

So the kingdom of God is not only unpredictable, it is *wonderfully* unpredictable! God is doing things and doing them in ways we don't expect, can't predict, and marvel at. Though we shouldn't, marvel. That's God's way. We should expect the unexpected, predict the unpredictable, and rejoice in a God who does things so differently than us. Choosing and using tax collectors and sinners, Canaanite women and Roman soldiers, common fishermen, and even those who were persecuting Him! Choosing and using common water, words, and bread and wine as the mustard seeds of His gifts. For look at these small things - a splash of water, a morsel of bread, a sip of wine, a few words. Yet from these . . . what growth! What a harvest! For that small splash of water turns a sinner into a saint! Those *few* words forgive *all* your sins and proclaim a life that is eternal! And that morsel of bread and sip of wine feed us with the food of heaven, the Body and Blood of God the Son Himself, and unite us to Him in His perfect life! **Who would have predicted that?**

But there's one more surprise, one more unpredictable, one more person God chooses and uses that we wouldn't have thought - and that's *you*. And no matter who you are, no matter how many people you know or who know you, in the grand scheme of things, all of us are mustard seeds. And yet God is able to plant you and use you to grow and accomplish much in His kingdom. And today we especially remember that **of fathers.** That faithful fathers can have a long and lasting impact through their children raised in the faith. So if you have, or had, a faithful father, thank God for him. And if you didn't,

and not all do, thank God that you have a faithful Father in Him. For that's who God is before all else: the Father. The Father who cares for you and all His children, and wants all people to be His children.

So, really, there are no unwanted children in this world. Or adults. Your heavenly Father wants you. And redeemed you. And is here for you. And a God like that . . . who doesn't demand, but serves, who doesn't take, but gives, who lays down His life for you . . . well **we have finally come to what is predictable!** Because that is who God is and what He has always been and what He promised from the very beginning. And He is for you. So that in this unpredictable world, we have something we can count on. Someone, actually. **HIM**. And I don't know about you, but I would take a faithful heavenly Father over a predictable world any day and every day. That while I may not know how everything is going to turn out, He does. And that He can use mustard seed me and whatever little mustard seed things I can do to accomplish that? What else is there to say but **thanks be to God!**

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.