

Sermon for Proper 6, Year B

The Text: Mark 4:26-34

Given the right circumstances, most things will generally grow by themselves.

For example, consider our gardens. Most of the time, all you need to do is plant the seed, ensure it gets a little water and light, and the plant will normally grow by itself.

We don't need to tell it what to do. We don't need to place a sign next to the seed saying 'please send roots downward and stems upward'. We don't need to tell it when to mature or when to stop growing upwards. We don't need to tell it when to produce seed or fruit or flowers.

Of course, we can do all types of things to help our plants maximise their growth by removing weeds, spraying for diseases and pests, and by ensuring they get enough water and sunshine, but generally plants will grow by themselves without instructions and without our help.

Similarly, while there have been recent attempts to genetically modify foods, we normally can't make plants grow any faster or slower than they do, and you need to accept they'll mature at their own pace.

Today Jesus tells us the kingdom of God is a bit like a farmer who goes out to sow his seed. Then, whether the farmer is working or sleeping, the crop will basically grow by itself. Just like a farmer or gardener sows seeds and the crop will grow by itself, as the seed of the Gospel is planted in people's hearts, the kingdom of God will basically grow by itself, according to God's bidding and timing.

Isn't this wonderful news?

Put it this way: It's not up to us to make the kingdom grow! The success of the kingdom of God is not dependent on us! Sure, we are encouraged to be diligent and faithful in sharing the gospel with each other, but we don't need to beat ourselves up for not doing enough to 'save souls for Christ'!

It's wonderful to know that all we have to do is plant the word of God and let the Holy Spirit do its work in its own good time. Isn't it great to know that, just as a tiny mustard seed can grow into a large tree, God works through

even a small gathering of people like us to produce the fruit of the gospel which can be seen and appreciated by the larger community?

But despite this simple and liberating truth, how many times are we tempted to make the kingdom grow our way and within our own time-frames?

How many times do we think God's kingdom is dependent on our efforts? How many times have we despaired because we reckon there's too few making an impact on the kingdom of God, and so we criticise each other for not doing enough for 'mission'?

How many times have we not trusted the Gospel will actually work without our help or manipulation to make it seem convincing? How many times have we tried to re-package the Gospel in the right way to make it more appealing? How many times have we tried to re-interpret what God says in order to make it more attractive or more inclusive?

Part of the problem is that we live in an instant society. If we want hot water, we turn on the hot water tap. If our meal has gone cold, we zap it in the microwave. If we want to communicate to someone around the world, we pick up the phone, send an email, or talk on Skype.

Unfortunately, despite all the blessings of living in an instant world, we might be tempted to think unless we see instant results of our faithful service, it's not working.

Therefore, if we can't convince others to believe in Jesus during one conversation or one worship service, or we don't see our numbers increase each week, or if we don't see immediate results from the gospel's work on our children or grandchildren, then we figure we're not doing our job right and have to change what we do in order to make it work instantly.

When we don't immediately see the results we're after, we might be tempted to think the Gospel hasn't worked. We wonder such things as: maybe we didn't say the right thing. Maybe we're not convincing enough. Perhaps we've scared them off by being "too religious". Maybe we need to repackage our faith so it becomes more acceptable or appealing.

But what's wrong with sowing the seeds of the Gospel and letting them mature and grow at their own pace?

Whoever heard of a farmer sowing seed one day and expecting to harvest it the next? Just because you don't always see immediate results, doesn't mean God isn't slowly working his seed of faith within people's hearts.

Just like the growth of seeds in the ground, the work of God is mostly hidden from our sight. Just because we don't see any effects doesn't mean it's not effective.

The trouble is, when we want to see immediate results, or the instant effectiveness of God's word, it shows we don't trust it. If we don't trust the word, then we may not trust the One who spoke it. We may become impatient with God and be tempted to tell people what they *want* to hear, rather than what they *need* to hear. Then what we end up giving them is not the Gospel but something else. Sure, what we give them might be effective at times, but it won't provide the seed of faith they need to settle in their heart, and there grow and mature.

Just like a farmer who doesn't need to understand exactly how or why their crop grows the way it does, we don't have to understand how God's kingdom grows. And since we don't understand how it grows, we can't manipulate it, and even if we try, we may do the wrong thing despite our best intentions. We're to simply trust God's word, God's ways, and God's timing.

But of course, even though we don't understand how God's kingdom grows, we do understand how it's planted. It's planted through the God's word and sacraments. These are, in a sense, the seeding machines God uses to plant his seed. Therefore, we trust, given the right circumstances where the word is preached in its truth and purity, and the sacraments are administered rightly, the kingdom of God will grow all by itself.

In the same way, just like the planting and the growth of the crop is up to God, so is the harvest. We don't get to harvest his crop, but God does. God may use us to plant his word as we share our faith and the gospel of forgiveness with others, but we might not see the harvest of that word.

Just like Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians, '*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*' (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

Now it's quite possible some may reject God's word, and ultimately that is not our fault and it certainly isn't God's fault! Some may reject the grace of God because of their own stubborn ears and hardened hearts. We should receive great comfort from this parable. We are to simply proclaim the word of God in its truth and purity, and we shouldn't be too worried if we don't get to see any results, even over a long time. The kingdom of God is hidden from our sight and its growth is done in secret. We simply won't always see the result of our labours.

Also, it's comforting to know the growth of the kingdom of God is not dependent on human activity, or even measurable by human standards. God will grow his kingdom, not us. We don't have to know or measure the yield of the crop, but simply trust God knows his crop intimately. He knows what's best for it and how to achieve the greatest yield.

So therefore, keep patiently planting the seed of God's word. Keep having family devotions. Keep teaching Religious Education in schools. Keep teaching the young in Sunday School and Confirmation. Keep meeting in small groups where you study God's word. Keep gathering together for worship to be nourished by God in word and Sacrament, no matter how many or how few we are. Continue to share your hope in Jesus Christ with others, but don't be disappointed when you don't see any immediate results.

Trust in the power of God's word. Trust his word will do the work it needs to do to tear down and to build up, to threaten and to comfort, to kill and to make alive. Trust there will be a harvest at the right time.

And praise God he's sown a seed of faith within you and that it's still silently and patiently doing its work to produce fruit in you that lasts. Amen.