

Proper 7B (Pentecost 2), 2009

Text: Mark 4:26-34

Title: Seeds and Farmers

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How's the corn looking?

If you want to strike up a conversation with anyone in the state of Iowa, this should be your opening line.

How's the corn looking?

It doesn't matter if they are a farmer or not. It doesn't matter if they grew up on a farm, or have lived their entire life in town, in Iowa, everyone watches the corn.

One nursing home in the town where I served on vicarage, would take the residents on long bus rides through the country, just so everyone could see how the corn was looking.

And so you can have long, in-depth conversations about how the corn looks. How it looks in different areas of the county. How this year's crop compares to last year and the year before. How the size of the crop will affect the price. And everyone knows that the corn should be knee high by the fourth of July.

For many years, farming communities lived and died by the crops. As a child your Christmas and birthday presents could be determined by how the crops did.

If it was a good year and a bumper crop, then everything was great. Plenty of money, everyone's happy. The church offering plates are overflowing.

If it was a bad year and the crops failed, it could spell disaster for the community. No money, everyone's depressed. Time to tighten the belt and conserve. Enough bad years in a row and you could lose the farm, and suffer the humiliation of selling off your land and all your equipment for a fraction of what it's worth.

Most farmers I know are worriers. They are pessimists. As good as things are going now, they remember how quickly things can turn. They remember the hailstorm fourteen years ago that wiped out the entire crop. They remember the blistering hot August of '83 that just about ruined them. As good as things are now, they could always be worse.

And so nowadays farmers doing everything they can to ensure a good crop. They rotate their crops and carefully test their soil. They use the latest high-yield hybrid varieties, guaranteed to withstand drought. They treat their crops with insecticides to kill any living thing that might want to munch on their valuable crops.

Now you probably didn't come to church this morning for a seminar in agriculture. But that's what we get in our texts. Old Testament. Psalm. Holy Gospel. Hymns. It's all about planting and growing.

Just look around you. The church is now covered in green. We are in the season of Pentecost, the season of the church, the green, growing time of the church year. We will be in this green, growing time until Reformation Day comes in October. Our paraments are reflected in nature as the brown of winter has now been completely overcome by the green of spring.

And so in our gospel lesson, Jesus tells two short little parables about growing.

The first parable is usually called "the parable of the growing seed." It might as well be called "the parable of the lazy farmer."

The farmer sows his seed, and that is it. After that, all the farmer does is sleep. "He sleeps and rises night and day..." Notice what the farmer doesn't do in this parable. The farmer doesn't weed. The farmer doesn't spray for bugs. The farmer does not even water his crops. But the seeds still grow. All by themselves, automatically.

How? The earth does it. The farmer doesn't understand, and he doesn't need to. The seed slowly grows matures and ripens, and then it's time to harvest.

This farmer is lazy by today's standards. But his crops still grow.

Nothing that modern farmers do actually makes the seeds grow. They provide a setting that makes growth more likely, but they don't actually make the seeds grow. It's the soil, along with the sunlight and rain- all provided by God.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like this. It's like a lazy farmer and seeds that grow automatically.

Here in the church, we're like those modern farmers who try all the latest approaches and techniques to make things grow. We change the church service around to try to attract people. We do demographic studies and surveys and try to make our church fit with what people want. We try not to talk about things like sin and guilt and hell, because we don't want to scare people off. We are tempted to think that if we do everything just right, that people will believe and our church will grow and all our problems will be solved.

This parable reminds us that things are out of our control. We can't force people to believe or to join the church or become more active or give more. We can't make these things happen. It would be great if we could. If we could come up with the perfect service, the perfect sermon, the perfect church building, and everyone would flock here and the church would be overflowing each and every week.

But things don't work that way. It is the Lord who calls people to faith. It's the Lord who grants them growth. Only the Lord can change people's lives. It's the Lord who's responsible for

those who are being saved. When St. Paul writes to the church in Corinth he says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but the Lord caused the growth.”

If you have faith, it’s because the seed of God’s word has taken root in your heart. If you are growing in your faith, it’s because God is at work in your life. God does everything, from start to finish.

It’s a miracle, it’s something we can’t possibly begin to understand- that the Lord would choose dead, lifeless sinners like you and me and give us new life. That Jesus would give His life for you and me. That the Lord would use simple things that water and word, bread and wine, to give us these gifts of life. That the Lord would continue to love and forgive us week after week.

Just like the farmer doesn’t understand how a seed grows, we don’t begin to understand this mystery of faith.

Faith is something the Lord creates. We can’t force it, we can’t engineer it. And that’s a good thing. Imagine if it were truly up to us to do everything. Imagine if it were up to us to create faith in someone’s heart. We would surely fail miserably. It’s a good thing that the Lord does everything.

But that’s not an excuse for us to be lazy. There’s still planting to be done. The Lord creates faith comes through the means of grace, word and sacrament. This is how God’s word is sown into the world. For this, the Lord uses His servants. He sends pastors and missionaries to preach publicly and to scatter the seed far and wide.

And He uses you, too. Every week that you are here, the Lord fills your pockets with His seed. His seed is there in the liturgy and the hymns, in the readings, and in the sacraments. Stick around for Bible class, and you’ll receive even more seeds. As you leave this place your pockets are overflowing with the seed of God’s Word.

For example, consider our epistle lesson from 2 Corinthians. That last verse reads, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

This is one of many seeds you have received here this week. This is a seed that bears fruit in your life, but also in the lives of those you meet this week. You will meet folks this week who are tired and run-down. People who are depressed with this old, dying world.

Scatter some seed. Tell them that in Christ they are a new creation. Tell them that they have died with Christ and have new life in him. Tell them that just as Christ was raised to new life, we have new life in him. Sin and death no longer have control of us. We have the joy of eternal life and we are already a new creation in Him.

Once you have scattered that seed, there’s nothing more that you can do. The Spirit creates faith where and when it pleases Him. There’s no guarantee that the seed will grow. But there is one guarantee. One thing that you can be sure of. Where there is no seed there can’t possibly be a

crop. Not every seed is guaranteed to grow, but every seed that is not planted is guaranteed not to grow.

It's frustrating to us when we plant seeds that don't grow, no matter how much we water and weed and do our best to make sure that they grow. This is most frustrating when it's our own kids and grandkids, our close friends and neighbors, who simply refuse to believe or refuse to grow in their faith.

Remember the parable of the sower. The parable of the sower tells us why this happens. Satan may snatch the seed away. The cares of this life may choke the seed. The seed may grow, but without roots it will shrivel and die. But when there is good soil, the seed will produce a crop up to a hundredfold.

So the Lord's kingdom will grow, whether we understand how or not. It's His kingdom, His seed, His harvest. It starts small, but will grow and flourish under His care.