

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 13, 2021 (Proper 6, Year B)
Mark 4:26-34

This Gospel reading reminds me a lot of some conversations we've had around my HOUSE the last couple weeks. Do we have any perennial gardeners here? My wife comes from a long line of them.

At our OLD house she had created huge, beautiful gardens all over our corner lot. People would slow down when they drove by our place to get a better look at them.

Well, we just sold that place this week. And all those perennials had come from Wendy's mom and grandmother, who have both passed away now, so one way or another, they were coming with us to Aitkin. We divided most of them and brought them over. So what took me 8 years to prepare for her over there, I had to do all at once here.

But here's why I mention it. Just a couple weeks later, at the OLD house you can't even tell that we TOOK anything. The gardens are just as huge and beautiful as ever. But HERE, the portions that we split off and planted are small and shocked by the move. Some of them are really struggling, and we don't KNOW if they are going to make it.

So ONCE again, we are reminded that there are NO guarantees in life. As author Ken Canfield notes, a farmer can do ALL the right things and still LOSE a crop. The farmer can till the ground at the right time, put in the right seed, and irrigate and fertilize by TEXTBOOK. But that still doesn't GUARANTEE a crop. In the end, God calls us to plant the seed and nurture it, but whether and HOW it grows isn't UP to us.

That's how it is with people too. That's why Jesus TELLS this story. Just like plants, people grow and mature at different rates. Check this out.

(Watch video "Famous Failures.")

As one person put it, "Great minds and high talent, in most cases, CANNOT be hurried and, like healthy plants, grow SLOWLY."

That's how it is with Kingdom of GOD too. Jesus described it: "A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how..." We scatter the seed, but we're not ultimately RESPONSIBLE for its growth. We can't MAKE things happen. The process by which the kingdom of this world BECOMES the Kingdom of God is a slow one, sometimes VERY slow, and it FRUSTRATES us. So, at the same time, if we have faithfully scattered the seed, we're not to BLAME for its FAILURE to mature IMMEDIATELY. It's not UP to us. Jesus cautions us here to be patient.

It may take a long time to see the fruit of our labor. Parents KNOW this. We see it in our children. Mark Twain wrote, "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years." It took 21 YEARS for MARK TWAIN'S father to see the fruit of HIS labor.

When we sow the seed of the Word, we really don't know what we're DOING or what effect we're having. The writer H.L. Gee tells this story. In the church where he worshipped there was a lonely old man, old Thomas. He didn't have any family and had OUTLIVED all his friends and hardly anyone KNEW him. When old Thomas died, Gee had the feeling that there wouldn't be ANYONE to go to the funeral, so HE decided to go, so that SOMEONE would be there for the old man when he went to his final resting-place.

There WASN'T anyone else there, and it was a windy and wet day. The funeral reached the cemetery, and at the gate there was a soldier waiting. He was an officer, but Gee couldn't tell his rank under his raincoat. The soldier came to the graveside for the ceremony, and when it was over, he stepped forward and swept his hand up to a salute that might have been fit for a king.

Gee walked AWAY with this soldier, and as they walked, the wind blew the soldier's raincoat open and revealed the shoulder badges of a brigadier general. The general said to Gee: "I suppose you're wondering what I'm DOING here. Years ago, Thomas was my Sunday school teacher. I was a wild kid and I caused him a lot of trouble. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe everything I am or WILL be to old Thomas, and today I had to come to salute him at the end."

Thomas didn't know what he was doing. No one ever really does. It's simply our task to sow the seed, and to leave the rest to God.

Years ago, a man who had spent his whole life working with teachers in a continuing education center said this: "Good teachers must be in love with the art of sowing the seed, but don't NEED to be there for the harvest." When it comes to people's hearts, a good crop may seem unlikely, and it may take years to come in, SO LONG that the SEWERS may NEVER get to see it themselves, but Jesus says, "Have faith — the harvest is in GOD'S hands."

Of course, Jesus isn't ONLY talking about plants and children; he's talking about the church and the kingdom of God. Did you know that pastors have one of the highest drop-out rates of all professions? More pastors leave the ministry the most EVERY other occupation.

What's WORSE is that pastors have one of the highest SUICIDE rates too. You would think that of ALL people, PASTORS would be the most HOPELESSNESS RESISTANT group, but this is the reason — we pastors keep thinking that we if just TRY HARDER, PRAY DEEPER, WORK LONGER, DO MORE that we can HELP that little seed along, MAKE it happen. And when it DOESN'T grow as fast as we want it to, despite SO MUCH time, ALL our effort, we feel defeated and useless. And these pastors give up, not just on their ministry, but on themselves.

That's the EXTREME, but this is ALSO why people give on churches too, why people LEAVE churches. They try to help, but things don't always go the way they expect it to. And so, they give up on their church.

What Jesus is saying here is "Don't lose hope, don't quit." ALL WE can do is rely on the promise that farmers and gardeners, and teachers and parents already KNOW—that what happens with the seed depends on GOD, and NOT on us. We can tend to it and do all we can to HELP the seed grow, but, in the end, WE don't MAKE that seed sprout; GOD does.

When it comes down to it, we're not called to be SUCCESSFUL; we are called to be FAITHFUL. It's simply our task to sow the seed, and to have FAITH, and leave the REST to God. This is what farming and gardening is like. And this is what PARENTHOOD and TEACHING is like. And this is what the Kingdom of God is like, Jesus said, because this is what LIFE is like.

Do what you can; trust GOD to do the rest. Amen.