

Introductory

The Parable of the Growing Grain (26-29) is exclusive to Mark. The Mustard Seed has parallels in Matthew (13:31, 32) and Luke (13:18, 19). None of those texts are appointed in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW, this text is appointed for Pentecost 4B, and the Matthew and Luke texts are not appointed for either LW or LSB three-year lectionaries.

In case you hadn't noticed, the membership numbers of the LCMS are in decline. Schools and churches are combining or closing, in many cases due in large part to small numbers. Many pastors find themselves out of work, and with the paucity of vacancies come a corresponding lack of calls for them, and some have to find part-time work.

Rare is the pastor who finds himself in a church growing numerically, and many of those in shrinking congregations find themselves looked to for answers on how to grow this thing, or at least how slow the exodus. This state of affairs often becomes personal for a pastor and his family. It's his vocation, and when he suffers the whole family suffers.

In another way, it is just as personal also for some of the members of the flock. They can't help but notice how this place used to be packed, and now it's not, or that we have gone from two services to one or have begun to talk about dualing with that neighboring congregation, and how can we get somebody in here who's going to grow this thing.

They notice that the ratio of funerals to baptisms is high, and rightly wonder about the future of their congregation, a place that maybe has always been there for them, and in many cases has been a part of their family for many generations. That one church in that one place, I've heard that they are growing, and if they can do it, then why can't we?

We have tried a lot of different things to turn it around. We have, on the synod and district level, spent untold dollars to find better ways to tell the laymen that they need to do a better job of telling people about Jesus. Somehow, we think that if we can just come up with the right program or methodology, every congregation can be like that one.

On the congregational level we have tried everything from getting rid of the old pastor to make way for the younger, to making church more of a carte blanche type of a thing, to doing things that are just plain silly, but seemed like a good idea at the time, and the time honored tradition of finger-pointing doesn't even seem to help. Maybe it makes it worse.

This text and other places in the Bible would have us to think that we ought to expect growth in the Church, and we should. What the Bible does not teach is that it will be the same kind of growth in the future as it was in the past. Nor does it teach that growth will occur equally and that it will be in all times and places. Clearly that is not the case.

We should not expect the church in this time and place to grow numerically in the same way that it did post WWII, when G.I. Joe returned home to Rosie the Riveter, glad just to be alive, wanting only to reproduce, go to work, go to church, and go home. Then birth control came, allowing us to not have children, and we have done that in large numbers.

In Rural America, modern agricultural practices have made it possible for one man to farm a couple of thousand, not a couple of hundred acres, making for fewer people on the same amount of land, affecting rural churches. People from the church in the middle of the corn fields look at attendance of 150, down from 250 back in the day, and what's up?

The explosive growth of the Christian Church in the early years is a phenomenon unequaled in human history. In a few hundred years, and in the context of ongoing persecution, Christianity spread throughout the entire Roman Empire, and by the fourth century, the Mediterranean Sea had become Our Sea, not the Romans'.

By the end of the first millennium the banner of Christ waved over most of Europe, and the grand buildings continue to pay homage to the faith that has largely left that place. Christendom had a good run, and birthed America, and the Christian religion has always been strong in this nation that embraces the free market in religion as well as economics.

Many who have populated our nation have felt so strongly about their religion that they have been willing to leave home and family forever, endure an arduous and dangerous journey by boat to get here, and make a life out of little to stay here. Many of the immigrants who come here today come for religious freedom, among other things.

Compared to the rest of the world, we are still the leading Christian nation, at least numerically, and while the center of our religion seems to be shifting, and while many who bear the name "Christian" are not exactly orthodox in the LCMS sense, there are still more people who bear the name of Christ than there are members of any other religion.

So, the Kingdom has grown, like a seed planted in the earth grows, dramatically like a mustard seed grows, and we have been front and center of that growth, but now the growth has shifted, and at the end of the day there is little we can do about it. The evermoving geographical center of Christianity seems to be shifting south and east these days.

At the beginning of his fourth chapter, we read the first parables that Mark relates to us. He begins the chapter by having Jesus tell the Parable of the Sower, and then the hearers

ask Him what's up with parables, and He tells them. Then come parables about a candle, and then today's text; the Parable of Growing Grain and the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

Textual Notes

Growing Grain

26. Using the typical formula to introduce a parable, Jesus talks about how “ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ, ὡς ἄνθρωπος – the Kingdom of God is like a man.” A figure of speech that makes a comparison using the words “like” or “as” is a simile. A parable is an extended simile, and usually – but not always – there is one point of comparison, like here.

The parable is about a man, and the point of comparison is that man putting seed into the ground, and what happens when the man does that; you get a plant. How exactly does that happen? Why does it grow? You plant the Word, and when you plant that word, Christians appear. How exactly does that happen? Why does it grow?

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that.

Most people have an understanding about planting seeds in the ground. If you are in the Midwest, they have a very deep and intimate understanding of the concept. My people are farmers, descendants of farmers, and gardeners. Those who don't actually farm are in the industry, buying and selling grain, servicing machinery, delivering “inputs” to the farm.

Jesus could have picked a lot of different things to which to compare the Kingdom of Heaven, but He chooses this one, and there's a reason for that. In fact, a large portion of the entire fourth chapter of Mark is parables using comparisons from ag. He chooses those comparisons mostly because the concepts used are familiar to Hearers.

He doesn't have to explain about putting seeds into the ground and they grow, or not. They all would have been very familiar with the different types of soil from which plants spring, or not. These are concepts familiar to people in Iowa, but surely not unknown to people in the city, many of whom garden, and many are not far removed from the farm.

Do not eliminate but retain and use this imagery given to us by none other than Jesus Himself to create an analogy in the mind of your hearer. Use words to paint a picture of a man doing what this man is doing. As far as that goes, if a person knows nothing of seeds and plants, then you don't need very many words to explain. It's not complicated.

27. Thirty years ago I read Helmut Thielicke's, *The Waiting Father*. That book gave me an entirely new and different understanding of parables. While most theologians focus on the

Law in parables and even invent a Law application for parables with a Gospel focus, Thielicke brings out the rich Gospel content of these wonderful stories Jesus tells.

He says that the point of comparison here is that the man does nothing to make the seed grow, lying down and sleeping, and all the while the seed grows. The farmer does do things; he plants, likely he cultivates, and he harvests the crop. What the farmer doesn't do is “μηκύνηται ὡς οὐκ οἶδεν αὐτός. – know how the seed grows,” or makes it grow.

The first four verbs (27) are in the subjunctive mood, indicating expectation of a certain outcome, but with some uncertainty. “καὶ καθεύδῃ καὶ ἐγείρηται νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν, καὶ ὁ σπόρος βλαστᾷ καὶ μηκύνηται ὡς οὐκ οἶδεν αὐτός – Should a man lie down and rise up for a day and a night, and should the seed sprout and grow, he does not know how.”

The man was sleeping, and he expected that sprouting and growing would take place, and as a matter of fact it does. He just doesn't know how that happens. He only knows that this sort of thing often – usually – happens when you put seeds into the ground. People around here just got done planting seeds in the expectation that they will grow crops.

Sometimes when you put seed into the ground, nothing happens, and that's the exception to the rule. It's about the likelihood of that thing happening, which likelihood has an effect on our expectations of the one leading to the other. But as to the mechanics of seed growth, we know about germination, and just how does that germination work anyway?

Back in the 90's, I asked a smart woman who worked for Pioneer Seeds how seeds grow, and she answered, “You put them into the ground, and they grow.” When pressed for a more specific answer the Biologist kept repeating that sentence. In the new millennium, when this text came up again, I asked a man from Pioneer in Princeton, IL. the same thing.

Same response. The current Internet talks about stuff like the right conditions for germination, and basically says, “You put them into the ground, and they grow.” Science (ABS) says, “Isn't it amazing that a tree as tall as a building can emerge from just a tiny seed...Mother Nature is brilliant and knows exactly when the seed is ready to grow.”

Yes, isn't “Mother Nature” brilliant. When you get right down to it, there are a lot of things about God's Creation that we don't understand or not understand completely. I understand that the earth is moving at about 90 mph, but I don't understand why I'm not constantly falling down. The Sun puts out a lot of heat, but never runs out of fuel.

If I ask the average American how the internal combustion engine works, she will probably ask me what's that. If I ask how a car runs, she will say that you put the key or fob into the correct place, turn or push a button, and then put it in gear, and away you go. With the smart fob, I never have to take the fob out of my pocket, and it unlocks the door.

Ask me how an engine works, and I have an understanding. Ask the mechanic how an engine works, and he has a deeper knowledge than me. Ask the man who designs and builds engines, that guy knows how engines work. You would say the same thing for any man-made creation. But when it comes to much of God's creation, only God knows.

This parable must be seen in light of the Parable of the Sower, which comes at the beginning of this chapter. In that parable, the seed is – “The Sower sows the Word,” with variable results, depending on the soil. Then the Parable of the Candle, followed by this Parable of the Growing Grain. The seed – the Word – grows, but they don't know how. Still don't.

We need to understand just how new and profound the Parable of the Sower was for that time and place. The idea that a Kingdom (of God) would grow by means of the preached Word, sown as seed on the ground – who comes up with this stuff? Everybody knew that if you want to grow a religion, you do that by force of arms and by force of Civil Law.

It's easy to see how a religion would grow like that. You conquer a place, and you force them to adopt your religion. You maybe add some of their pagan gods to yours, but the newly conquered will numerically grow your religion. Mohammed tried to grow his by proclaiming the teachings of Allah. It didn't work, but violence and terror worked well.

Christianity is the only religion I know of that gains numbers simply by a man proclaiming the Word of God. It's the only way we make gains, and with a few exceptions, it's the one we have consistently been employing for two millennia. The question as to how that works – you proclaim the Word, and the thing grows – exactly how does such a thing take place?

It's the way Jesus got followers, and when He refused to gather an army and take up arms, the message was that this religion was going to advance in a way not like the rest of them. On Pentecost Sunday, three thousand converts (Acts 2:41) were made. They were converted by means of the preached Word from the lips of Peter and the rest of the Twelve.

Later on, Peter and John were arrested for preaching Jesus. Shortly after that (4:4), Luke tells us, five thousand men (about fifty thousand total) “heard the Word and believed.” How does that happen? There is no coercion or bribery or anything of the sort. In fact, Jesus had said that being a Christian would entail suffering and may well bring death.

It is a truly remarkable thing that the preaching of God's Word brings about a change not only in the mind of the hearers, but in their very souls. It is, the writer to the Hebrews says, “sharper than a two-edged sword” cutting to the chase of man's inmost being, not just the periphery, like the other religion. Conversion to Christianity makes a man a new man.

How does the Word do that? It just does. Put it into a man's ear, and it grows.

28. Jesus talks about how “αὐτομάτη ἢ γῆ καρποφορεῖ – of itself, the earth brings forth fruit.” That adjective, “αὐτομάτη” is the first word in the sentence, placed there for emphasis. It occurs only two times in the NT; here and in Acts 12:10, where the angel is springing Peter from the slammer, and they come to the “iron gate” leading to the city.

That gate opened to them αὐτομάτη.” It’s the word that brings us the American word “automaton,” defined as “a self-operating machine.” We know the concept well. How does any machine keep going without anybody doing anything to it? It just does. How did that gate in Jerusalem open up to make possible Peter’s Great Escape? It just did.

How do seeds grow when you put them into the ground? You put them into the ground, and they grow. They just do. And how does the Kingdom of God grow? It just does, where the seed is planted into the ground, and we don’t necessarily completely understand exactly how that happens. And sometimes we plant seed, and it doesn’t grow.

Now of course we know that in none of these cases do we know absolutely nothing. In the case of the automation, we know that somebody built it and designed it to do what it does. In the case of the opening gate, God or the angel facilitated the opening of the gate. Without a seed there is no plant, and the farmer has to plant the seed, and here he did.

Not even the best of seeds will germinate under any old conditions. Like the Internet says, you have to have the right conditions for a seed to germinate, but even then, not all seeds that are planted in those same conditions come to fruition, and not all that do come to fruition do so equally. Some bear more fruit. The Kingdom of Heaven is like that.

We know that the Kingdom of God comes by Word and Sacrament, and the Church is the vehicle for that coming. We sow the seed when we proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments, and we expect that where there are those means of grace, the Kingdom will be extended, Christians will be made, and our expectations are usually realized.

Except for the times when they are not. The question of how the seed grows, or not, leads to the question of why, and the answer to cur alli non alli (why some are saved, and others are not) will always be; there are things about that known to us, and there are things about that unknown to us, but known to God, and that will have to satisfy for now.

29. But when “παραδοῖ ὁ καρπός – the fruit offers itself,” the farmer knows exactly what to do; “εὐθὺς ἀποστέλλει τὸ δρέπανον – immediately he sends the sickle.” That figure of speech is a synecdoche, a part for the whole, like when the captain calls for “All hands on deck” or when Mark Antony says, “Friends, Romans, countrymen lend me your ears.”

The captain wants more than just the hands; he wants the whole person, who happens to be attached to those hands. The dictator wants more than just your ears; he also wants the whole person. To “send the sickle” means to send the harvesters into the field, armed with the instrument or means to harvest the crop, and the timing of this is crucial.

The sickles are sent out “ὅτι παρέστηκεν ὁ θερισμός – because the harvest has come.” Some of these Lutherans seem to think we should sit by passively and wait for God to grow the Church. But there are things that the Church can and must do in order for the Kingdom to grow. Paul says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”

Christians should not spend a whole lot of time snooping around the things of God we don’t and can’t understand. Better to spend our time planting, and observing when germination and growth occurs, and when there is a harvest, go and gather that harvest. and if we don’t want to do those things, then God will find somebody else to do them.

Mustard Seed

30. The actual phrase “The Kingdom of God is like” is not used. But He does use two phrases, both questions that indicate that He is speaking a parable. Clearly, He is doing just that. The first question, “Πῶς ὁμοιωσωμεν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ, – to what should we compare the Kingdom of God?” sounds a lot like “The Kingdom of God is like.”

That first phrase is pretty straightforward, and the second phrase is the one that catches our eye. The second introductory phrase sounds a lot like the word “parable” as He says, “ἢ ἐν τίνι αὐτὴν παραβολῇ θῶμεν – and with what parable should we place beside it?” He seems to be using that one phrase to teach a mini course on the mechanics of the parable.

No less than three times, and in three different ways does He reference the nature of the parable as “laying beside” one thing to another; laying an earthly story down beside a heavenly truth to better teach us earth-dwellers a new truth about God and Heaven, which you know to be the basic definition of a parable as laid down by WAM II.

First, He uses the preposition “ἐν” followed by a pronoun in the dative case to indicate location beside; He is asking “beside what” parable shall the Kingdom of God be located. Secondly, He then uses the word “παραβολή,” almost always translated “parable” literally meaning “to throw down beside,” both for the sake of making comparison.

Thirdly, He talks about taking a parable and asking what we should “throw it beside - θῶμεν,” making for a certain redundancy as He asks of the “throw beside (parable), what they should throw beside it.” At the end of the day what does it matter that Jesus really, really wanted to emphasize the “throw beside” nature of what He is saying?

Apparently, Mark seems to think it matters, because he wrote what he did under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It does matter that Jesus is teaching us about the methodology of teaching in parable. Does it not make sense that we teachers should teach like Jesus, who is the Master Teacher? And should we not preach like Jesus preached?

Not only does Jesus use parables, but much of the OT as well as the NT other figures of speech and stories, and the entire book from Genesis to Revelation reads like a story, a story that is true in every aspect. God writes like the New Journalists write, the way the ancients used to write; non-fiction that reads like a story, and it's a good read.

It's the way people talk. Ask your spouse or child about their day, and he will tell you a story. Ask about a vacation or a football game, and you will get a story. People also use figures of speech – we like idiom – all the time without even thinking about it. When trying to explain something, like to a child, they will often say “it's like,” for example.

I talk to pastors all the time who talk like that, and who also even may exhibit a sense of humor. They may even be apt teachers by talking like that, but when they get into the pulpit, they leave all that nonsense behind and just preach the Word, making sure to preach the Gospel. That's good, but maybe we should preach like Jesus preached.

31. Having rhetorically asked, using throwing beside language, to what the Kingdom can be compared, He proposes looking at the mustard seed and bush (tree). He notes that the mustard seed is “μικρότερον ὃν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς – small of all the seeds on the earth.” Mustard seeds are very small (see Boetje's Mustard, for example).

31. From that very small seed “καὶ ὅταν σπαρῇ, ἀναβαίνει καὶ γίνεται μείζον πάντων τῶν λαχάνων – it becomes larger than all the garden plants.” The point of comparison is between a small seed and a large plant, and some mustard trees can grow to be larger than most fruit trees. Think of a medium sized apple tree and google image “mustard tree.”

There is the tree, “καὶ ποιεῖ κλάδους μεγάλους – and it produces large branches,” big enough so that birds can perch in them. This is Botany 101; a seed, then a plant, then the plant produces fruit, and that fruit is put into the ground and becomes seed, and from that seed comes another plant, and that plant produces fruit, for generation after generation.

There are many kinds of mustard plants, and the tree common in Palestine today – probably in the day of Jesus? – is the White Mustard variety, *Sinapis alba*, with seeds measuring “1 to 1.5 millimeters in diameter” (WIK). That's pretty small. I actually own several actual mustard seeds, and they are very small seeds. But they're not the smallest.

I have some Moss Rose (*Portulaca grandiflora*) seeds that are smaller than my mustard seeds, for example. But here Jesus describes the mustard seed by using the comparative “μικρότερον – very small,” and not the superlative “smallest – ἐλάχιστος.” To be sure, “μικρότερον” may be used for “smallest,” but that is the secondary meaning.

Clearly it is not the meaning here, since the mustard seed is small, but not the smallest seed. The Internet gives, “for example, the orchid seed is so small and fine that it's almost dust-

like” and many web sites take great delight in correcting Jesus. Arndt talks about “very small” not “smallest” in Bible Difficulties and Seeming Contractions.

Almost all the translators – every single English translation I’m looking at – have Jesus calling the mustard seed the “smallest,” not a “very small” seed. I wonder if the phrase that follows “very small - of all the seeds” causes them to translate “very small” as “smallest,” or if they are lazily following the lead of the KJV yet again.

KJV has “less than all the seeds,” and what is noteworthy is that those (KJV) translators did not use the word “least,” which was available to them. But they do follow the word “less” with “than all,” leaving the meaning rather ambiguous to us. I suspect that the seventeenth century reader would have felt less uncertainty about the meaning.

33. Mark relates now “τοιούταις παραβολαῖς πολλαῖς ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον, καθὼς ἠδύναντο ἀκούειν – with many parables He kept preaching to them The Word, and they understood.” Before this, Mark had related several different parables that Jesus told, and now is done relating specific parables, but he tells us that He spoke many more as well.

Later he will record some more of them, and Matthew and Luke – but not John – record some of them, some the same, some the same by summarizing or expounding, some that are completely different from their fellow synoptists. In three years of preaching, Jesus told lots of parables, and sometimes He used the same one more than once, like we do.

Mark says of these and the other parables that Jesus “was speaking the Word.” The verb is “λάλει,” imperfect tense, continuous action, and the noun is “τὸν λόγον.” Jesus was continually and habitually and as a matter of course preaching the Word of God by means of parables, “as they were able to listen and understand,” and that’s sort of a big deal.

The word that I have translated “to listen and understand” is the verb “ἀκούειν,” which is a present imperative form that means more than just “to hear” a sound or to hear what somebody is saying. By using stories to teach, Jesus made what He was teaching to be very easily understood, and that’s a good thing. We want to be able to be understood.

34. Preaching the Word of God by means of telling earthly stories with a heavenly meaning was not ancillary but was part and parcel of the preaching of Jesus. Mark tells us “χωρὶς δὲ παραβολῆς οὐκ ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς – without parables He did not preach to them.” He knows that we all like a good story, and a good story well told is a real treat.

Telling stories for the sake of telling stories is okay but telling stories to teach theology should be a large part of preaching. Done well, a story can give us insights that cannot be had by giving it to us straight. He speaks of the result of His speaking in parables “δὲ τοῖς ἰδίοις μαθηταῖς ἐπέλυεν πάντα – moreover, to His own disciples He explained all.”

That verb occurs only here and in Acts (19:39), towards the end of the Ephesus riot. Paul is under attack, the man reads the riot act to the crowd, and then tells them “εἰ δέ τι περαιτέρω ἐπιζητεῖτε, ἐν τῇ ἐννόμῳ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐπιλυθήσεται – if beyond that you inquire, in the lawful assembly it will be determined” if what Paul is saying is true or not.

The definitions for that verb “ἐπιλύω” at biblehub.com are “to loose, to solve,” like you would a puzzle or a religion. It defines the occurrence in Acts as “to explain (what is obscure and hard to understand).” The assumption of the town clerk is that there is a truth about the Christian religion, and to solve that puzzle you need better understanding.

The verb “λαλέω” is often used to refer to preaching and teaching, and what Mark is telling us is that when Jesus taught and preached – they are the same thing – He used stories to help His hearers to better understand what He’s saying, and it worked! I use stories all the time to help my hearers better understand the Word of God, and it works!

Law/Gospel

Nothing/Something – Continuing the theme of God being responsible for a person becoming a Christian, without the planting and growing we would be nothing, but with the planting and growing, we are something, and that something is God’s doing.

No Word/Word – This can be a theme for almost any text, and the problem is that it can come off sounding self-serving. We lament those poor suckers who don’t have the word at all, and those who don’t have it “in truth and purity” and thank God that we do, and if we can do that without causing the hearer to feel smug, we have done something.

Sermon Titles

About Seeds and Plants

Seeds and Plants and God

How to Grow This Thing

It Just Does

Hymns

Come Ye Thankful People Come – LSB 892

On What Has Now Been Sown – LSB 921

Almighty God, Your Word is Cast – LSB 577

Thy Strong Word – LSB 578

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

Resources

ACC – Manlio Simonetti, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Mark).
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG – Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. Translated by
William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCLY – William Barclay, The Gospel of Mark.. The Westminster Press, 1975

FGG – James W. Voelz, Fundamental Greek Grammar. Concordia Publishing House, 1993

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, A Concordance to the Greek Testament.
T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament.
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. Oxford University
Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, 1977.

WP – A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, Baker, 1930

VINE – W.E.Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., An Expository Dictionary of
Biblical Words, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

BIB – www.biblos.com

GBO – www.greekbible.com

Digital Classics Library - www.perseus.tufts.edu

Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html