

## **Sermon: God's growth in our lives!**

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?”. We all know that one, don't we?

The question “how does your garden grow” gets us to the heart of this morning's text and the answer is certainly “quite contrary.”

Contrary to what we may think at first, when Jesus tells a parable, there's more there than meets the ear. You can't just skim them and then move on. They challenge you; they are intended to make you stop and think: “What does this mean?”

At the end of our text, Mark describes Jesus' use and purpose of parables in his preaching and teaching: With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.

To unbelievers, Jesus only spoke in parables. To his believing disciples, however, he explained everything. So, do Jesus' parables serve to conceal or reveal? The answer is both!

To those who have already hardened their hearts against Jesus, they conceal a truth about the kingdom of God. To believers they reveal a hidden truth about that same kingdom. I'm going to assume that we're all believers here, so what are we to hear in these two rather mysterious and puzzling parables?

Well, contrary to what many believe, these parables are not about what you should expect to see, but what you should believe about God's Kingdom.

In the first parable, the man scatters seed on the ground and then what does he do? He goes about his business and believes that the seed he has sown is growing on its own. In the second parable, a tiny mustard seed is planted, and we are to believe – again, contrary to sight and reason – that

this tiny seed is going to produce a bush that is larger than all the other plants in the garden.

These parables do describe how the Kingdom of God grows, but contrary to what many Christians think, these parables are not church growth manuals. In the first parable, the focus is not on the man but on the seed and how it grows without any intervention from the man. In the second, we're told that kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which when sown is one of the smallest of all the seeds planted in the ground – but there's no planter in the picture at all.

These parables are not about us or what we do to cause or force the kingdom of God to grow.

The Kingdom of God is different; it is different because it grows contrary to human reason. Principles of sociology, psychology, and business might be able to grow a great business or non-profit organization – but they can't grow the kingdom of God.

In fact, the kingdom regularly grows contrary to those principles. The first parable says that “while [the man] sleeps and rises, night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.”

This is one of the characteristics of Jesus' parables: the central analogy is often found in a detail that is unreal or seemingly out of place. When we see a field full of corn or a garden full of vegetables – we usually give the credit to the farmer or gardener. But here the focus is specifically not on the man because he doesn't have a clue how the seed grows once he sows it.

The focus instead is on the power essential in the seed itself.

What does this have to do with the kingdom of God? Well, like that man, we should not expect to ever know or understand how the kingdom and the church, grows. But we try, don't we?

We complicate the gospel ministry with countless programs, demographic studies, committees, seminars, mission statements, 5-year plans – all attempts to find that special something, to hasten or force the visible growth of the church.

Remember, Jesus didn't send his apostles out with the command to count the sheep or create volunteer positions for the sheep or even to grow the flock. He simply told them to "feed my sheep".

The Great Commission was not to recruit workers for the church but to gather disciples from all nations. When Jesus ascended into heaven the seed he left his church was Baptism, Forgiveness, and Communion. These are the things Jesus commanded them to go and do – because through these means of grace the Holy Spirit delivers Jesus to sinners.

Speaking of Jesus, where does he fit in here? While these parables are not directly about Jesus, we can certainly see how Jesus' own life fits the template of these parables, can't we?

God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit sowed his only begotten Son into the womb of the virgin Mary. From the little town of Bethlehem, a hurried trip to Egypt, and in the backwoods town of Nazareth, little Jesus just grew – hidden in plain sight from the people around him – even his own family.

What did he grow into? He grew into the perfect follower of God, by obeying even the smallest of God's Laws perfectly. While he had no sin or guilt of his own to answer for, much less pay for, he shouldered the sin and guilt of the world and hauled it to the cross where his Father harvested his life as the payment price for the sins and sinners of the world.

And three days later God raised Jesus from the dead to publicly declare that his wrath has been satisfied and the world has been justified; to declare that heaven's door has been opened to all. And he did all of that in a relatively invisible way, didn't he?

How many people saw the Son of God growing and obeying God on their behalf in that little boy from Nazareth? How many people identified the Son of God suffering for their sins – as a convicted criminal – on that cross? He just did it – everything we need for our salvation.

And what's the result? Well, is it nothing less than the result of the second parable – a tiny, almost invisible seed which grows into the largest of the garden plants?

Tiny little poor, homeless, hated and crucified Jesus has somehow grown into the largest religion in the world – his name is known to the ends of the earth. The book that was written about him – the Bible – is the bestselling book of all time.

Why? Because sinners of all races, languages and nations are drawn to him like a magnet; they flock to him to find shelter in his perfect life and atoning death.

Contrary to what most of the Jews of Jesus' day expected and contrary to what many people expect today, Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, grew from obscurity into a Savior big enough to redeem and shelter the whole world from God's wrath and judgment.

What does this mean for you? Well, it means you can stop agonizing over your sins; stop searching for ways to numb the guilt that lives in your heart; stop trying to excuse and justify your sinful behaviors; stop thinking that you're so deeply stuck in a rut of sin or addiction that you can never get out.

Jesus took all your guilt, all of your sins, and even all of your foolish excuses and justifications and nailed them to a tree and buried them in a tomb.

There is so much more, an eternity of more. A new heaven and earth where pain and sorrow and evil don't exist.

Jesus is not saying that once the Word is sown in a human heart, it's up to us to bring about growth. He's simply describing what any farmer or gardener observes when they plant seeds: they can plant an apparently dead seed into dead ground, and it somehow brings forth grain or flowers or trees all by itself. He's really describing the work of the church: we sow the seed – the seed of Baptism and Forgiveness and the Word on the apparently dead ground of sinful human hearts – and contrary to all reason, all expectation, even, sometimes, contrary to all hope: it sprouts, it grows, it matures, and it is eventually harvested.

Just like that tiny mustard seed grew up into a huge tree in which all kinds of birds could find shelter – so here on earth, God's Kingdom, the Church provides shelter for sinners today. Your Baptism is a mighty oak of new life as a member of God's family that not even the devil himself can chop down. Forgiveness is a lofty elm that no storm of guilt can blow over. Communion is a giant redwood whose indestructible promise of eternal life will not shudder or shake even in the face of death.

Contrary to the preaching and teaching of many today – do you get any hint of panic in Jesus' parables? Do you get any sense of doubt that the Word will produce the harvest he intended? Do you get any sense of the fear that anything on earth or under the earth can stop his harvest from being gathered in or his mustard seed from becoming a mighty tree?

Where is anything but the quiet confidence that we confess in our explanation to the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom comes".

The kingdom comes with Jesus. That's exactly what Jesus announced whenever he arrived at a new place, isn't it? The Kingdom of God is here.

Today, wherever you find the Gospel of Jesus purely preached and the Sacraments administered according to Jesus' command, there you will find

the Kingdom of God – an incredibly big and strong tree of shelter for sinners in this broken world, which is invisibly, but inevitably, growing towards the harvest.

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?” How does God’s kingdom grow? I have no idea. In fact, that’s not even the right question. Whenever and wherever the seed of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament is sown, God’s Kingdom grows. Period. That’s what Jesus is telling us in these two parables. God’s Kingdom might grow contrary to all reason and wisdom and expectation, but it grows. It grows invisibly and it grows incredibly. You have Jesus’ word on it. Amen.