

Pentecost 2B – Proper 6 (6/14/09 – *How God Grows His Kingdom–The Church*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Our *Holy Scriptures* for this **Second Sunday after Pentecost** seem to be full of answers – answers to several of life’s questions ... answers to questions that arise from the reading of other portions of the Word of God. That is good for us – that way we know where to turn for answer ... good answers ... sure answers ... Godly answers. And as we hear and ponder this Word of God, our prayer must always be that which we prayed in the *COLLECT: Blessed Lord, since You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.* So let us today do just that – namely, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Holy Scriptures – in order that our faith may be strengthened in the blessed and most assured hope of our forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation in Christ.

Last week we heard the account of Nicodemus’ late night conversation with our Lord. And when Jesus spoke to him about being born anew from above by the Holy Spirit – though one doesn’t precisely know where the Spirit comes from or where it goes ... like the wind – Nicodemus asked: ***How can these things be?*** [JN 3.5-9] In a way, our *Holy Gospel* for today is another response of our Lord to that question. Nicodemus didn’t understand how one could be born again – that it was something that had to be done by the Holy Spirit (Who remains unseen, like the wind, though His activity can be recognized). And that truth – strongly emphasized by our Lord by His ***Truly, truly, I say to you*** [JN 5.5] – still holds today. We don’t see the Holy Spirit precisely at work. We know **where** He works: in the Word and the Sacraments. And we know **that** He’s been working – a person believes ... our faith is strengthened ... even in the midst of great trial, we have that peace of God that surpasses our human understanding. But we don’t really **see** Him working there. One person hears the Word and believes. Another person can hear the same Word and yet remains in unbelief. And we wonder, with Nicodemus: ***How can these things be?***

We here at St. John earnestly desire not only our own faith to be strengthened, but also that others would come into the Kingdom of God – and, come into the Kingdom with us **here**, if at all possible. But as earnestly as we desire this, we must not seek to **make** it happen by what **we** do. Jesus told Nicodemus: ***The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*** [JN 3.8] The Spirit will work through the Word and Sacraments – He will create and sustain living faith. We know that is the case. And so we know that the Holy Spirit will work where the Word and Sacraments – God’s *Means of Grace* – are

used faithfully. For *through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, where and when it pleases God, in those that hear the Good News that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake.* [AC V.2] But we still don't know the precise *where* and *when* – those are left to God's internal, unrevealed wisdom and will.

Consequently, we can say unequivocally that all such thinking that dares to claim certain growth in a particular place and time (like a particular congregation at this time) is contrary to God's Word as we have heard it both last Sunday and this. As Jesus says: ***The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; HE KNOWS NOT HOW.*** [MK 4.26-27] Anyone who claims to know precisely *when* and *where*, must answer to – and become subject to – this Word of God.

But notice that in this parable, Jesus – as is often the case – mentions ***a man ... someone*** scattering the seed. Just because we do not know the *how* or precisely *when* and *where* the Holy Spirit is going to work through the Word to create new faith and grow the Kingdom, does **not** mean that we are not to be scattering. The Holy Spirit works through the Word – and He uses His Church ... and His workers and believers in the Church ... to scatter that Word by which He will work. We don't know the *how* and *where* and *when* – but we do know that **we** are to scatter the seed of God's Word ... regularly ... gladly ... liberally ... and above all faithfully. Faithfulness is what is required of us – **not** measureable results.

Alas, we are **not** the faithful scatterers we are called to be. We hide the seed away – even neglect it all too often for ourselves. We doubt the effectiveness of the seed – the Word – and try to “help it along” with our own man-made words and works. And make no mistake, such doubt of God's Word is sin on our part. God promises very clearly and literally that His Word will not return to Him void, but will accomplish His purpose [ISA 55.11]. But when we don't see the results we're looking for ... the success we'd like to see ... in the place we'd like to see it ... at the time we want it, we distrust God's design ... and look for another way to draw people in.

For part of our sin problem is that – contrary to the Word of God we heard in our *Epistle* – we all too often walk by sight rather than faith ... both as individuals and as Church. We look at what seems to get results – or lack of results – and conclude that the Gospel alone won't do the job. We look at what seems to be drawing people in and covet the growth of another congregation – and may be quite willing to compromise the Word and our own confession of that Word for the sake of a little gain. We are too often like Esau – willing to sell our birthright (that is, the new-birth-right we have from above by the Holy Spirit) for the pot of porridge of a few more people in the pews and a few more dollars in the plate. “If

it works, if people come in and offerings increase, it must be good,” our flesh tells us.

But such is often not the case, dear Christian friends. I just read an interesting commentary by someone of the reformed/evangelical background lamenting the direction that the reformed/evangelicals have taken in worship. His major premise is that: “evangelicals have become a movement actually destroying itself” – by way of its worship. He calls for a return to prayer, the public reading of Scripture, and participatory liturgy – the very things the ancient and traditional liturgy have always given. In his article he comments that “God has been moved around to be things like a reluctant Spirit we sing down [from heaven] with our songs or a divine innovator always blessing as much radical change as possible.”

I look around and see this same “spirit” too much alive in our own church body. But that is no surprise – for that same “spirit” lives within each of us. We look to so many things – other than God and His Word. Isn’t it often the **music** of our favorite hymn – rather than the Word of God paraphrased faithfully there – that attracts us ... gives us a good, “worshipful” feeling? It’s not that we are to be **unfeeling** – but our feelings should be based upon what God says and does ... upon God’s promises in His Word ... the Spirit’s faithfulness in working through the Means of Grace He has ordained.

As the Psalm appointed for this day – PSALM 1 – puts it: *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law (the Torah ... the Law-and-Gospel-Word) of the LORD, and on His Torah he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.* [1.1-3] This Word of God is the seed that is scattered. And without our knowing precisely how – except that we know the Spirit is working there when and where it pleases Him – it produces *by itself* our translation says (*automatically* is the Greek word): *first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come* [MK 4.28-29]. The seed of God’s Word is planted and first the blade – that new, heavenly-given faith – sprouts. Then as the Holy Spirit continues to work through the Word in our lives, faith grows ... generally imperceptibly – like newly sprouted corn which we cannot see growing moment by moment ... but over the course of a day ... a week ... a month ... the growing season ... grows from that seed into a tall stalk. And at the end – when God has matured our faith as much as He will do here on earth – it is time for the harvest ... when God sends His holy angels to bring us into the heavenly, eternal granary.

And this work of the Holy Spirit, this Kingdom of God – though it be small ...

nearly imperceptible to the eye in the context of the whole world or even our community – ***grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade*** [4.32]. For Christ that tender Sprig – the Son of God Who descended ***from the lofty top of the cedar*** – was broken off and planted on the ***high and lofty mountain*** of the Cross of Calvary [EZE 17.22]. And though He was small in the eyes of the world – a nobody “Mustard Seed” from Nazareth – having allowed Himself to be planted in the earth, Christ has put forth the branches of His outstretched arms to lovingly draw in people from every tribe under the shade of His forgiveness. ***And all the trees of the field shall know that HE IS the LORD ... HE HAS spoken, and HE will do it*** [17.24]. That is how we are found in Christ to be a new creation [2COR 5.17] – by the Holy Spirit of God working through the Word that declares to us the blessed salvation of Christ our heavenly Cedar, Mustard Seed, and Grain. In Him we have life and mature until we come into fullness of knowledge in heaven.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]