

Sermon – Mark 4:26-34
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
4 Pentecost – Year B
17 June 2018

“We Know Not How”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This past week, our Fellowship Hall was transformed into a deserted island on which 81 children were shipwrecked for a week of Vacation Bible School. It was our most well attended VBS in memory, and that meant it took a lot of work to pull off. Julie and her team did a fantastic job, creating these amazing set pieces and creating an environment to learn about Jesus. Snacks were made, games were played, Bible stories were dug into. It took a lot of work by a lot of people. I even learned song actions, for goodness' sake – song actions! And now, having sung our last VBS song, its over. After today, that ship and this waterfall will be disassembled and, I assume, discarded. VBS, it seems, will have disappeared. I'm mindful of a question a parent once asked me after a different VBS at a different church: “Was it worth it?” She wasn't unappreciative, mind you. Just curious. Was it worth it to put in all that work for a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't event without any tangible evidence that anything good would come of it? I could only reply, “Well, it was certainly fun. As to whether or not it was worth it, we'll just have to wait and see. You never know what God is going to do with these things.”
2. “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” Jesus gives us today two parables that offer insight into the work of his kingdom, and into our work as his church. It's a funny sort of business we've entered into, isn't it? We pour ourselves into events that

- come and go; we make meals that are delightfully made and delightfully consumed knowing we'll get hungry again; we lift our voices in full-throated songs of praise, but the last notes eventually fade into the air; we work on behalf of those whom the world says are not worth our time, effort, or energy. We send kids to confirmation camp and servants to Slovakia. We give our time and our financial resources to so many things that do not seem to have much worldly value. Is it worth it? There are no profit margins to monitor or production goals to measure. So what, exactly, are we doing?
3. Well, we are doing the Lord's work. Imperfectly, to be sure, but God's work nonetheless. "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground." The story of the gospel by which you have been saved is that of God entering this world fully through the Son, Jesus Christ, who gave himself away extravagantly; foolishly, in the eyes of the world, which could not see the value in those for whom he lived and died; but in the eyes of faith, fully, which see in his death a new seed planted in the earth and fully grown to new life in the power of resurrection at work in you. Christ the seed was sown, and you are the fruit, the grain, the full harvest that is now growing for the sake of the world.
 4. And so it is that we have become partners with the Sower, Jesus Christ. We go forth to scatter seed, tossing it everywhere, fully and even foolishly, trusting that it is not finally up to us to know if or where it will grow; trusting the God who continues to nurture growth and create new life when our labors have reached their end for the day. We know not how, and we need not know. As the now-sainted Pope John XXIII would say at the end of each day, "It's your Church, Lord. I'm going to bed." All we can do, and what we must do, is sow the seed of Jesus Christ, of new life and love, and then rest in the promise that God will bring growth while we sleep.

5. And goodness, does God bring growth. In his second parable today, Jesus reminds that not only are our seeds spread somewhat foolishly, they're also seeds that seem entirely unimpressive. Say, like a mustard seed, which Jesus calls the smallest on earth. And yet, when it is full grown, it produces a shrub that has more than enough room for all of the birds of the air. Each of our acts, done in God's name, helps to make this kingdom come, as we pray, on earth as it one day will be in heaven. We sow seed, sing songs, gather in prayer and go in service, to help make God's reign a reality; to help God gather in all of God's children, uniting and keeping together the family of God in pleasant, shaded rest. It is worth it? If that is what God will bring from our efforts, well, I should think so.

6. I'm reminded of a story told by my friend Steve McKinley, a retired pastor reflecting on his life in ministry, which I'll quote in full: "Once upon a time there was this pastor. A woman called him up because she wanted her son baptized. Her whole family was composed of fringe members of the congregation, but one cousin had been bugging her about getting the baptism done so she finally called, just to get her cousin off her back. The woman's husband, the child's father, was in the military, away from home on active duty, had never been a member of the church and really didn't see any reason for the child to be baptized. But the pastor agreed to do the baptism on a weekday afternoon with just the mother, her cousin, and one of her brothers present. They made the promises, but nobody took them seriously. The boy never went to Sunday School or Bible School. The family worshipped maybe once a year (either Christmas or Easter, certainly not both). When the boy got to junior high, the family gave into social pressure and sent him to confirmation, with the understanding that as soon as that was over with, he could "quit church" like everybody else in the family had. That's when the trouble started. I guess many would say that the pastor in question did not take baptism seriously enough, that his standards were too low, that he should have been more demanding." But, Pastor McKinley concluded, "I just

say I'm glad he baptized me." After all, you just never know what God is going to do next.

7. So, is it worth it? All of this work, all of this seed sowing, without immediate, visible, impact? Well, we'll have to see. You never know what God is going to do with these things. But Christ was dead and cast into the ground, and now he lives. So it seems as likely as anything else that God will keep growing grain for the kingdom. And, of course, once in a while you see it right away. On Friday, gathered in a circle with preschoolers, Erika and I asked them what their favorite part of the week had been. There were answers about this snack or that game, and a good number of kids who said they liked meeting new friends. But one little girl, maybe four-years old, said, "It was nice to get to know Jesus." And what has more value than that? So go and sow. Trust God to grow. Who's to say what God will do next? Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.