

Sermon for Proper 6, Year B

The Text: Mark 4:26-34

What's Right with The Church by William Willamon is a book that's brought encouragement and hope to its many readers in a world like ours where Christ's Church seems to have its back to the wall in its struggle to survive. In our time it appears that the practice of the Christian faith is on the decline. We all know folk who once attended the Church regularly and loyally supported its work, and who now have little or nothing to do with it. The Christian Church has less influence over the major developments in our nation than it once had. When the Church does speak out on vital moral issues, many people ignore what it says.

The Church seems to be an insignificant minority. The two parables in today's Gospel reading are our Lord's word of encouragement to those who are worried about the future of the Church. Our God is a God of small beginnings. But, from small beginnings initiated by God, come immense results. The seeds we sow for God will result in the greatest harvest ever.

The Lord of the harvest will see to that. Those who heard Jesus preach were astonished at the power in His words. His parables were anything but nice stories or pretty illustrations of everyday truths. Together with Christ's miracles, they are heaven's invasion of our world. His parables have been called "weapons of warfare against His critics." In them, Jesus takes items familiar to His audience - everyday activities like sowing and reaping, waking and sleeping - and gives them new, spiritual meaning. He makes familiar things look new - as pointers to what God is doing in our midst. Jesus' parables speak volumes to those who embrace the key to them: Jesus Christ Himself. He is the hidden meaning in most of His parables. In telling them, He's pointing us to what He has come to do for us, and how He is working in our midst to rescue and redeem us.

For those with eyes to see, there's an affinity between how God works in the natural world and the spiritual realm. Natural is supernatural. We may be the listeners whose response to God's Word, to the Gospel of our salvation, bears on its growth and results, but the growth itself is God's work. Who can adequately explain the life in a seed that grows and multiplies? How can the essence of life lay dormant for over 3,000 years in seeds found in an Egyptian tomb and still spring to full growth when planted?

Jesus sees parallels between what farmers and gardeners do and what God's word is doing in our hearts and minds. New life springing from a seed broken open in the soil seems like a parable of our own resurrection from the grave. Today's first parable traces the progress of God's word within us. We can be so impatient for results, not just within ourselves, but also in the lives of our fellow Christians, our fellow

Church members, that we don't allow God time to complete what can only grow and develop slowly, step by step. For some folk, the sowing's hardly finished and they want to bring in the header. God takes things slowly. God's never in a hurry.

We live in an era where people want quick results. We become anxious when that doesn't happen. Jesus, however, isn't in a hurry. He walks with us at our pace, so that we can grow in the way He sees best, in faith, hope and love.

Imagine what pressures there must have been on Jesus to set a hectic pace in His ministry and to proceed full-steam ahead. How different was Jesus' way of working! Though the burden of the whole world lay heavily on His shoulders, with people in desperate need in the lands adjoining Israel, with their needs on His heart, Christ Jesus took time to stop whatever He was doing to talk with needy individuals. Jesus spent lots of time with seemingly un-strategic, insignificant men, women and children, like lonely widows, tax officials and prostitutes. He doesn't seem bothered by the fact that these are not strategically important persons, but only that they are God's lost and straying children.

On His most important journey, the journey to Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus stops - yes, He stops - to help a blind beggar who is so dear to God that he must be saved. Because Jesus knows we must serve our neighbour, literally serving those nearest to us here and now, Jesus leaves those furthest away in His heavenly Father's hands. Jesus has all the time for needy individuals because the times and seasons of each life are in God's hands. With the outcome of growth in God's good time, Jesus gives each person who comes to Him what they uniquely need. He treats them differently: one man He asked to follow Him; to another He says: "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the LORD has done for you, and what mercy He has shown you (Mark 5:20)."

Just when you think Jesus should seize the opportunity to address the crowds coming to Him, He withdraws to pray. Jesus spoke with such authority and conviction because He first sought God's blessing on what He was going to do. His powerful preaching derives from His powerful praying, as He prays that God would bless the seeds He has sown. Where the Gospel of Christ is shared more, much more is happening behind the scenes than we think. God's word is never inactive. God says, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth: it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11)."

It is a joy to see people of all ages grow in their faith and commitment to Jesus and to grow in compassion, kindness and consideration for others. It's been said that "Growth is the best evidence of life". A living faith is a growing faith; the growth occurs mostly behind the scenes where God alone can see it. Our presence here today is one of the many things that are right with the Church.

The trouble is that the things we might personally feel are wrong with the Church loom so large in our thinking that we don't see all the good things going on all around us. In today's parables, Jesus reassures us that there will be a glorious harvest out of all proportion to all our sowing. It takes little skill to criticise the Church Jesus loved so much that He gave His life for it. There are few, if any, new or original criticisms of Christ's sinful groups of saints. It takes a lot more patience and skill to list all that's good about the Bride of Christ. Christ Himself is gradually preparing it to become a marital masterpiece, something of which He is proud.

It's incredible, isn't it, that Christ uses imperfect sowers like us to sow seeds that will blossom into eternity. The seeds we sow will make a difference. Jesus has an eye for the value of small things, small things like a cup of water to a thirsty child, a widow's mite and the difference one talent can make.

A church-goer said recently that his purpose in attending a church gathering is to be a different person at the end of the time together than at the beginning. I commend that attitude to you all. We can have confidence of this, for this is God's own work, as the Apostle Paul says:

"I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6)." Amen