

We Know Not How

Proper 6

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Mark 4:26-34

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the third article of the Apostles' Creed we confess "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen." Martin Luther has outlined what this means for all fathers and heads of the households in his Small Catechism: It means that "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

There is more to the meaning, but we'll stop there. What does it mean to confess that we believe that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus or come to Him? What does it mean that the Holy Spirit is the one who calls us, enlightens us, sanctifies and keeps us in the faith?

It means that creating faith is not something we do, but the Holy Spirit. As we hear in Romans chapter ten, "...faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." God is the one who creates and sustains faith in us as we hear His Word. Before we first heard His Word or were brought to Him in the waters of Baptism, we did not believe in God. We were dead in our trespasses. But now we do believe in Him and in His Word.

How did this happen? How does this happen? Well, again, we confess that we believe it happens. If we must believe that it happens, it must be something that we cannot see happening. If we could see it, then we would have no need to believe, would we?

That's the point we'll hear Jesus making in our text from the Gospel of Mark.

Verse 1

"(Jesus) said, '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.'"

Over the years, there have been numerous studies on plant growth. There was the test created by Gregor Mendel about how traits are passed along from pea plant to pea plant. There have been tests using Skittles in the mix they feed their cows, which some of you now use. And there have been many, many more tests beyond that. Yet none of these tests have shown just how life works for those plants. Only God knows how plants grow because He is the one who created them. More than that, God is the one who makes certain they get enough nutrients and water at the proper time to grow how He wants them to grow. He uses farmers in this process, most assuredly, but also the rain from rain showers and thunderstorms, as well as the nutrients naturally found in the soil, to keep them growing.

Today, Jesus tells us that God's kingdom functions in the same way. The Word is sown, and when and how God desires, a crop of believers is produced. But we don't know how that works. Faith is created from hearing, as we heard earlier; and yet as John wrote, "'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 born of the Spirit.'"

Don't be confused: this passage is about how faith and God's kingdom grow, not that the seed falls on different kinds of soil, and so many of them resist it. That was back in Mark chapter four. No, this text is about how we don't know how God works through His Word to produce faith. It is invisible to us, as it takes place in the heart, where no one but God can see.

Verse 2

“The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Now there are two ways to think about faith. The first is that you either have it or you don't. That is justification. You either believe that you are justified by the works of Jesus Christ alone, or you don't. But secondly, there is maturation, or growth, to faith as well. That is how Paul could write to the Corinthians that he had given them the Word as milk and not solid food because they were not ready for it yet.

Just like before, we don't know how faith matures, but we know that God produces it. Speaking to us through His Word, God feeds us what we need at the right time to help us to grow spiritually—sometimes giving us His Word as simple milk, and other times giving us the solid food of His Word.

As God promotes growth in the plants of the field, step by step, so, too, does He foster growth in our lives of faith. “(F)irst the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” The harvest will be when Jesus returns to judge. For the time being, “God's kingdom grows mysteriously of itself, at its own pace, and through the power of the Word. This reality often causes frustration among those who eagerly long for a rapid expansion of the Kingdom, and all the more as we only have a short-term view of things. But God's kingdom grows according to His plan and timetable. And it is a great blessing that things ultimately depend on Him and not us, for only He is able to bring home a great harvest for life eternal (ESV Study Bible, p.1663).”

Verse 3

“And (Jesus) said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’”

Today we know that there are seeds that are smaller than those of the mustard plant, and that Jesus was using a hyperbole to make His point. But we also know today that a particular variety of mustard plant can grow up to ten feet in height—the *sinapis nigra*. At that height, it would tower over anything else in an herb garden, including the gardener.

So while we do not know how God's kingdom and faith work, we believe that God does it through His Word and His Holy Spirit. At this point in the chronology of Jesus' life on earth, even the apostles were having trouble understanding what Jesus was telling them. And later on, they would have a hard time grappling with watching Jesus die upon the cross. But then they would learn that it was all for their good.

So, too, we may not always understand everything going on in our lives around us. We may not even fully understand God's Word in parts. But God continues to work in us, growing us up in His Word, as we hear it week to week, and as His Holy Spirit works within our hearts. We cannot see it, but we know that God is doing it. He is doing it because He loves us. And we know that He loves us because He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross to pay for our sins, and so He has.
In Jesus' Name. Amen.

