

The seed grows automatically

Mark 4:26-34

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

It's early summer and the crops in the fields are growing. But if a dry heat comes, the crops can all burn out. Insects and hail can also wreak havoc. Farmers better buy crop insurance. Who know what the market will be? It's a guessing game. You could just as well go to Vegas, but then you'd lose the fun of farming.

Once again, we ask: What is the problem? If there's no problem or no question, then there's no great need of a solution or answer. We have seen in this Season of Pentecost that we have a serious problem.

Then in the text today there is this note of saying: "We can be sure; we can be certain." In 2 Corinthians 5:5 Paul writes that God "has given us the Spirit as a guarantee."

We say nothing is certain except death and taxes, and some people manage to weasel out of their taxes. Yet we are dealing here with a matter of life and death.

What can we say here that is a living hope, a sure hope? That message is there in the Mark text, too. The first of the little parables in this section is about somebody who sows seed, and it grows up, but this not a lesson in botany. There is in the parable a phrase which says "it grows by itself." And the problem here is that the original Greek is much better. The word in Greek means "automatically." The seed grows automatically.

The second little parable about the mustard seed, which is quite small yet grows into something quite tall. Again, the point is, out of what seems totally small and insignificant, almost nothing, comes something huge.

They put these texts together to say: "We have a guarantee. We can be absolutely sure, absolutely certain." But we look at this and think of the precariousness of planting and farming and say: What kind of talk is this?!

It seems farfetched to us so we undermine the message. We know that it says we are sure, we are certain, but wink-wink, you and I know we kind of have to add to that. There are five ways we do this. Let's briefly look at them.

The first one is shown by going to church history. People take the parable about the mustard seed and say: "Well, the church started small, but look at how things have gone, how great they are!" But we know that in the history of the church that there are also things which are not great. When you read about the Ninth and Tenth Centuries, you know that these Centuries are called the pornocracies for a reason. It was so awful that you can't even talk about it in polite ways.

And there is also the centuries long threat of Islam. Between 632 and 732 A.D. Islam swept from Africa to Paris. The Turks were at the gates of Vienna in 1529 and again in 1683. Today radical Islam is co-opting the tolerance of the West to Islamize the West. C.S. Lewis, in one of his writings says (paraphrase): "The devil works harder in the church because he owns all the rest." He doesn't need to work hard there.

The second way we undermine the message that we can be sure, we can be certain is by saying: "We have to make sense out of it somehow. It has to be wise and understandable."

But The apostle Paul says in at least three places: "Remember, it's all foolishness." When we talk about the cross, the cross is nonsense, foolishness, and anytime we try to make sense of it, we're changing what it's about. And yet, the cross is our certainty.

The third way we undermine the message is by trying to bolster it by talking about miracles. The best illustration of this comes from the sixth chapter the Gospel of John and the feeding of the 5,000. That really means about 5,000 males, so it's altogether about 20,000 people. He fed them. They thought that was great! If you want to talk about a prosperity gospel, there it is. They had food and an interesting teacher. When the Lord points out that it is not that way, it says, they all fell away, even many disciples, so that only the Twelve were left.

Remember what Paul himself says when he talked about having a thorn in the flesh, a real problem, and he prayed that this problem would be removed, and the answer was "No" (2 Cor 12:7-10). This kind of thinking about miracles has real problems.

In the fourth place, there's the idea that I could have my own private miracle, my own personal miracle. That is first of all that I have some kind of change of life, a conversion. About a hundred years ago (1933), a Harvard professor by the name of Nock wrote a book called *Conversion*. What he found out was that conversion is found in all religions, in Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, as in Christianity. The same is true in the ancient world. Changing from a bad life to a good life is not tied to Christianity as such. We say: "Well, there's some kind of experience of God, isn't there?" But chaplains in mental hospitals will tell you that Christianity doesn't depend on conversion or responding rightly. Christianity depends on what God does for the mentally damaged, in spite of themselves. The same goes for you and me.

Finally, in the fifth place, we say: "The way we know that we can be sure, that we can be certain, is that it works, that it produces good works." At the funeral for a prominent and beloved Lutheran layman, the pastor said: "We know it's all by grace, but he was so good, he would have gotten in anyway." Everyone smiled and was polite, it was a funeral, but what that pastor said goes completely against what we're talking about, that God does it.

When we say that God does it, we're asking: What is the problem? What is the solution?

The problem we have is sin and death, and that is more than we can handle. And the answer concerns that word we mentioned earlier, the word “guarantee.” It comes just before the Epistle lesson for today, in 2 Corinthians 5:5, Paul writes: “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.”

This is also in the same book of Second Corinthians in 1:22: “He has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

It is also found in Ephesians 1:14: “[You] sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

We could say that the word “guarantee” is a faulty translation. To be sure, the text uses the word “guarantee,” but what is meant is something like a pawn ticket, or a down payment.

Best of all is to call the meaning of this word, guarantee, “his last will and testament.” This is that will and testament in which the Lord says: “I have adopted you as sons and daughters.” And his promise doesn’t fail. And so it says we have a guarantee, a certainty, a sureness.

Paul writes elsewhere in Romans 8:31: “What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?”

And then Paul goes on: “I am sure therefore that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38).

What is the basis for this? Paul writes in Romans 14:9: “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”

Earlier in Romans 6:9-10 he writes: “We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.”

Several verses earlier in Romans 6:5 writing about Baptism, Paul writes: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (As you know, the original Greek text requires the word “certainly.”)

In a few minutes we are going to sing the hymn, “Almighty God, your Word is cast, like seed into the ground.” We are going to sing about the seed and what God does automatically, by himself, his way. Thanks be to God. Amen