

Christ Our King Retirement Service

“The Surprising Harvest” Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 16, 2017

What makes God’s church grow? It depends which expert you ask. For some it’s location, location, location. Back in the 1980’s we were taught to follow church growth principles. The same things that grow a business can grow a church. You research the needs of the community and meet those needs. You touch people in their feel good spots. Bible teaching and preaching, talk about sin and grace, become liabilities to be avoided. A good course in apologetics, know how to argue for the truth. Convince people by strength of reason that Jesus died and rose again. Convince them by clear evidence that there is a creator God. Be persuasive, be eloquent, articulate. It’s all about how to win friends and influence people. Build a monster church that will cover them from cradle to grave with multiple staff, a gym and exercise room, a coffee lounge, a fireside room and they will come.

I have to tell you that over the years I have tried many of those things and mostly they fall short. They miss the mark. So what is the mission of the church? The mission of the church is described in various ways: make disciples, preach law and gospel to lead people to repentance and faith, rescue the perishing. How would you describe the mission of the church in terms of today’s text? Plant the seed of the gospel, but how, and where?

Fifty plus years ago the Ontario District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod looked at the farmland to the west of Toronto. Scattered about were little tiny towns like Port Credit and Clarkson, Erindale and Cooksville, Streetsville and Meadowvale. All these sleepy little hamlets shared something in common. They were all about to explode in population as bedroom communities for the economic machine just to the east. Designers had already built a four lane highway and christened it the Queen Elizabeth Way. To the north they had drawn a line through farm country and were poised to pave over a wide swath of paradise and call it the 401. Smack in the middle our district mission board came across a tidy few acres just off 5th Line West and Highway 5 that just might be a good site to plant a church. The rest, as they say, is history.

The seed was planted, and God blessed it, and His church grew. And do you know who we have to thank for it? The forward looking mission board? Charter members of Christ our King? From time to time we remember pastors and people, as we do today and we thank God for them. One planted, another watered, but don’t ever, ever forget who gave the growth. The most painful lesson I’ve learned in thirty-seven years of ministry is that God is jealous of His glory and He will not give it to another. And any time pastor or people seek to claim some of the glory, stand up and say, “Look what we did,” God will not let you get away with it. I might have planted, another might have watered, but it is our Lord God who gives the growth. So that neither the one who plants, nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who gives the growth. To Him we give all the glory, all the thanks, all the praise.

When a pastor goes out to sow the seed of the Gospel, he is often tempted to pick and choose when and where to sow the seed. He looks one way and thinks, no, too many weeds. No point in sowing the seed or planting a church there. That neighbourhood is all ethnic or all brown skinned. He looks another way and think, no, soil is too thin or no, the ground is too hard or too dry. He looks around and tries to find “good soil” and he sets out to scatter the seed with care and frugality. He doesn’t want to waste any of the precious seed. That neighbourhood is all Catholic or Chinese or Muslim. So he turns toward people who are like him and throws the seed their way. In the process something surprising happens. Some of the seed misses its intended target. It is blown off course by the wind, it falls among the weeds. He doesn’t worry too much about it because most of it went where he wanted it to go. But then something happens. A surprising harvest happens. Places that he thought, places that I thought were hard packed or full of weeds or full of rocks suddenly yield a surprising harvest. Meanwhile places that I thought were fertile and oh so promising turn out not to be.

Here is the lesson for us today. God showers His grace indiscriminately. He sends rain on the just and the unjust. His goodness is intended to lead you to repentance. The Spirit blows where He wills. Jesus builds His church where He wills. So, what is the focus of the parable? And what is the focus of the mission of the church? And what should be our focus today? It is the Good Seed that yields surprising and unexpected results in surprising and unexpected places. The humbling lesson that takes us so long to learn is this: The church doesn't grow because of us. It doesn't grow because of our eloquence. It doesn't grow because of our persuasive speech. It actually grows in spite of us. We hold a treasure in jars of clay so that we might be reminded that the surpassing power is from God and not from us, not from you, certainly not from me.

God says His Word will not return empty. Instead, His Word will accomplish what He desires and achieve the purpose for which He sent it. The seed is the word and the miracle of growth, and harvest doesn't live in the hands of the farmer. It lives in the heart of the seed. The word does what it is sent to do. It convicts the world of sin and reveals our lost condition. It brings forth faith by the power of the Gospel. Life lives in the seed. Now the ultimate farmer is God, and He could bring forth a harvest without us, but He delights to let us help Him from time to time. So He invites you and me to have the privilege to work in the harvest fields for a time. And we are called to sow the seed, spread the good news of the Gospel that Jesus died and rose again for sinners like us. But that's not all. In the parable, we sometimes have to chase away the birds so that the seed might have a chance. Sometimes we have to pull weeds so that the small sprouts have a chance to grow and thrive. Sometimes we have to hoe and till so that the roots will grow deep. And every day as we work by the sweat of our brow, we support and encourage one another so that on those hot and tiring days, we not grow weary and lose heart.

We had the call and privilege to sow some seed at VBS this week. And we pray that God's Spirit will do His work to make that seed grow and bring forth faith. Don't be surprised when the child who seemed the most distracted, the most disruptive and the least interested surprises you one day and comes back and thanks you for what you taught him about Jesus when he was eleven. You have God's promise that He will do His work and the seed of the Word will yield surprising results. We have a wonderful blessing in the Word and promise of God. The Bible is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. It shows us our sin and how we fall short of God's holiness. It shows us our Saviour and the forgiveness of God. In this Word we have the promises of God. In this Word we have a firm foundation for life in the midst of a shaky world. We need that. Our children need that. They, and we need to know that Jesus loves us and is with us always. He is there to protect us and lift us up. He is there to give us peace in our hearts when the things around us might make us afraid. He is there to bring us to eternal life one day. He came to be our forever friend.

God's Word does its work. It does not return empty but will accomplish the purpose for which God sent it. There are blessings from this past week's VBS that I've observed here, that you won't notice unless you look for them. There are families that come here year after year and who have no church home but who really think of this as their church home. They are not yet in regular worship or Sunday School, at least not yet. But we keep on farming. We keep on tending, cultivating, and weeding. And we keep on praying for the Spirit of God to continue to do His work of planting faith and making it grow.

As children of God working in our Father's field, we have one more calling. We are called to support and encourage one another on those hot and tiring days that we not grow weary and lose heart. Yes, your feet get sore, and your back gets sore, and your nerves get frayed, and your voice gets hoarse. To all of you who worked so hard last week at VBS and then went home and crashed on Friday afternoon, to all of you who cooked by phone on Friday night, to all of you who still wonder if VBS was worth it, or if Sunday School is worth it, or kid's club, or Urdu ministry, or youth ministry, or radio ministry - I want to say YES! Serving the Lord is always worth it. Jesus knows that. *"Jesus (is) the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."*

He thought you worth the suffering and pain of the cross. He thought me worth it too. God has said that His word will not return to Him empty but will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which He sent it. It will produce a harvest. It will bring forth a crop of righteousness. It will bring forth a harvest of souls for eternity.

We know that because the seed is the Word, the promise of God and it carries within it the dynamite power of God. St. Paul writes: (2 Cor. 3:5-8) *“We are (not) sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.”*

The growth of the kingdom of God comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. The planting and harvesting happen as Jesus sends out workers into His harvest field. Paul continues, *“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”*

So it is to God that we give all the glory and all the praise now and forever.