

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – June 17 (Proper 6)

Fear is a really odd thing. It is not rational. You can point out that none of the spiders in the house are really all that poisonous to an arachnophobe and it won't make any difference. They may still never go in the basement where they once saw a spider scurry under some door. You can point out the sturdy railing to the person with vertigo and they still won't go near the edge. Fear paralyzes us, it distorts our lives and it imprisons us.

Our congregations are often beset by fears, and the people to whom we preach are often given over to acting out of fear. John tells us that God's perfect love drives out fear. I believe that Mark was writing to a community of fear and today we are in a multi-week series of readings of his fourth through sixth chapters which speak quite pointedly to some of the fears that our people and our congregations continue to face today. Individuals can face a wide variety of fears. Many of us are simply afraid of change in our world around us. Things are moving so fast it feels out of control.

Most of the parishes that I have dealt with have struggled with their fears. They are afraid of failure, of financial woes. They are afraid when they call a pastor that they will get some misanthrope or misfit. Ever since WWI Lutherans in North American have been especially afraid they will not be accepted into the American religious scene. In the war fever that broke out in that conflict mobs burned a number of Lutheran churches and schools to the ground because they worshiped and taught in German. That period seared the psyche of many congregations. We are afraid of conflict. In the 1970's conflict erupted in our Synod and many of our friends left and we are still dealing with the hurt and the reaction to that. Most of the conversations I have had with brother pastors in the synod have had the specter of that conflict lurking somewhere in the background.

Perhaps the worst is that many of us today look around the pews and see a congregation dying. Our hair is too gray and our numbers are shrinking. Where have all the young people gone? It makes us afraid and that fear often causes us to do some strange things. We are afraid that we are shrinking because God is angry with us. (We will actually deal with that one in a few weeks.) We are afraid that somehow we are just doing it wrong. If we would only learn the secret of success we too could have a vibrant and thriving congregation, like we see in the church down the street with a full parking lot and scores of young families streaming out of its doors on Sunday. And so we forget who we are and try to be just like them. But Lutherans always make miserable Baptists and we end up becoming a parody of ourselves. Our children sniff our hypocrisy and make their exits even more quickly.

We might see our Synod also exhibiting some of the characteristics of a body which is afraid. As we decline we look like many corporations which have seen market share decline. We seek uniformity, we seek to return to the glory days of old. It is not a forward looking vision but a backward looking vision. Is it because we corporately, as a Synod, are afraid of what tomorrow brings? Should we be afraid? Is faith afraid?

I remember how it was to feel that way about my parish and a non-denominational congregation in town. But then I met that other pastor and some of the parishioners. I discovered that they were just as beset by fears and had just as many problems. They confided in me that they looked at my parish with its parochial school and stable ministry longingly and worried that they were not like us. They felt that their ministry was ephemeral and transitory. Our fears often blind us to what we really are in Christ. In the absence of information we often fill in the blanks ourselves and what we supply is rarely good. That is the way of fear.

In that situation what we often do is imagine that the problem lies with us, that we are somehow doing church wrong and as a result our church is not growing. There could be some truth to this, but we most of the time look for the quick fix. We want to hire a music person but not change our hearts. We want to hire a youth director but imagine that this means we don't have to learn the names of the young people in our congregation; we have a youth person to do that. We have looked at the surface of what the successful congregation is doing and imagine that if we just do what they are doing we will succeed, but the truth may be much more complex than what we see. They may genuinely care for people and express it. That is not something that changes with a praise service or a new program.

Fear crosses all sorts of boundaries. One of the regular attenders of the Tuesday discussion group, Armenio, served an Hispanic congregation. He spoke of the challenge of preaching to a people who are forced by fear of deportation into dishonesty in order to remain in the country. Then he has Pentecostal Hispanics asserting that he is not Christians because he dresses like a Catholic, and the Catholics assert he is not Christian because he does not have a statue of the Virgin with candles burning in front of it. Recent political conversations and the climate in the US has hardly backed those fears down.

The truth of it is, if you honestly can say that you are doing "sowing" ministry, putting the kingdom out in the world through ministry and you are not growing, your beef is with God, not with your program or anything else. If it is not bearing fruit, you will have to talk to God about that. He is the one who sees to the fruitfulness of our labors.

What is the remedy for fear? How do we deal with them? We thought that our fears today were often centered on the conflicts which occupy our news these days. Terrorism, North Korea, threats of a trade war, Russian cyber-attacks, and much more have brought us images which have made us afraid?

1. Prayer – God is a bulwark and help in this. Prayer is living out the reality that I am not the center of the universe and I don't have to have the solution to all these problems.
2. Simply exhorting them "don't be afraid" is cruel and will not work.
3. Faith will be essential. Faith trusts that God has an answer, I may not be able to see it, but he has an answer. The real antidote to fear will involve faith.

4. Community – often my wife, my friend, or my counselor is able to provide me with some perspective. Fear that is held inside is often out of control inside of me.
5. Love – John tells us that God’s perfect love casts out fear. Fear often cannot be stopped, but it can be replaced. Love is not going to make the fearsome thing go away, but it may mean we are no longer afraid of this thing that used to make me afraid. God’s love for me and the love which his love engenders in me for my friends and enemies, may mean I am not longer afraid. I may not even be afraid of the one who means kill me just because I am Christian – the persecutor. In this scene, God’s love will not let fear distort my life. I will speak.
6. But fear may not always be the problem, it might just be the object of our fear that is misplaced. The properly placed fear is the beginning of wisdom. The disciples in the boat after Jesus calmed the storm had been afraid of the wind and waves. But after Jesus hushed the wind and waves, they were more afraid of the guy in the boat with them than they had been afraid of the elements outside the boat. Are we more afraid of the world or the things around us than we are of the one who comes to us in the cup? Have we ever been afraid of him? Or are we beholden to the “cheap grace” that Bonhoeffer saw in American Christianity.
7. Confront the issue – if I am afraid of something often my fear magnifies the issue into something much greater than it really is. But when I face it, the object of my fear often shrinks quite rapidly.

Is fear a good thing sometimes? Of course! I need to be nervous when I ascend to the pulpit or stand up in front of a congregation. If we lose those nerves we have lost something precious. If preaching becomes “old hat” it is time to hang it up. But fear can also really be a form of idolatry. Fear can sometimes be a symptom that I am putting myself into the middle of this picture when God belongs there.

We have a tendency to try and “fix the problem.” Sometime the best thing is to just “stand there and not do something.”

Collect of the Day

Blessed Lord, since You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This is another prayer which would make more sense if you took out the semicolon after “life” and before “through Jesus Christ...”

The blessed Lord has caused the entire Bible to be written for our learning. What does it mean to be “blessed.” When I hear that word I usually think of God blessing me, which he does and it is appropriately used there. But how do we bless God? The old Saxon root-word from which “bless” comes is actually related to the word “blood.” To bless in Saxon meant to “blood” someone. The Greek for bless is “eulogeo” or speak well. We bless God when we speak well of him, when we praise him. Thanksgiving is the speech we offer directly to God in response to his great acts for us. Praise or “eulogeo” is the speech we offer to other people in which we tell them what God has done for us.

Of course we often get this backward. When we sing in church, “I praise you...” we think that singing this is the praise, and in one sense it is. I can praise my children by telling them that they have done a good job. But it is not the whole of praise and I think that this second part of praising is what it means when we call God blessed. This is a form of speech which principally happens outside of the confines of the Church building as we are conversing with people and we speak of the wonderful things that God has done for us. This is praising God, in much the same way that I might praise a builder who properly constructs my house by telling other people about him and the work he did. If they are also looking for a builder they will then turn to him. That is the sort of praise I think it is talking about when we call God blessed.

What is the basis for our praise? We tell the world what God has done, we read about God’s great work in the Scripture, but of course we also experience it ourselves in our life. We tell other people about these great things, this is praise, this is blessing God, speaking well of him.

The Scriptures are there for our learning, but remember that God teaches hearts as well as minds. He teaches the whole person, teaching our eyes to see, our hands to serve, etc. We ask that he would give us to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. There is a marvelous progression in that process which begs to be explored. We hear it, we then read it for ourselves. As we get deeper into that Word we mark it, we notice things which are important. We learn more about these things and finally they become part of our very being, we have digested them, they are woven into our very self.

Perhaps the preacher and the congregation need to be reminded of the purpose of Scripture. Many Christians have the mistaken notion that the primary purpose of the Bible is to tell me how to live my life. It is the owner’s manual of life. But the Bible is better understood as a message from God which conveys his love – a love letter. It is not telling us how to live except that the Law of God condemns us that he may forgive us.

All this is purposeful. We pray for this process to take place so that we may embrace and hold fast the blessed (there is that word again) hope of eternal life. This might not seem like a difficult hope to hold fast to, but it is not always so easy and obvious. The world and our enemy would gladly have us hope in something else and works mightily to sever our relationship to him who is the Life and the Truth and the Way. We need God’s gift to embrace and hold this hope fast to ourselves. In fact, without Him, we are hopeless in this regard.

Perhaps the key to the question we asked earlier about what to do with fear is here. The Word of God (Jesus) coming inside us is the remedy to fear. It takes us, enters us, has its way with us, and that transforms our fear into confidence, hopeful expectation, and trust. This could be a great sermon!

Ezekiel 17:22-24 This text is the conclusion of a longer oracle through Ezekiel. I have included this whole section for you about the faithless perfidy of the puppet king in Jerusalem and what God will do to him. The passage we will read is what God will do next.

¹¹ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ¹² “Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon. ¹³ And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath (the chief men of the land he had taken away), ¹⁴ that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand. ¹⁵ But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?

¹⁶ “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. ¹⁷ Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. ¹⁸ He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things; he shall not escape. ¹⁹ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely it is my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head. ²⁰ I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. ²¹ And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken.”

²² Thus says the Lord GOD: “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. ²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.”

These three little verses from Ezekiel come from his period of discouragement, when he is trying to get the people to accept the fact that God has brought them into exile and they are going to be there for a while. In the preceding chapter Ezekiel had called them the whole Israel, building on

Hosea's metaphor of an unfaithful bride, but at the end of the chapter God pledges his wonderful love for them despite who they are. In chapter 17, Ezekiel tells a strange parable about a great eagle plucking the top of a cedar tree and planting it by the river so it might grow. It does but the cedar tree sends out its shoots and branches to another eagle that it might water them forgetting that it is already planted in a fertile and well watered place.

He then interprets this for us, thankfully, to be about the people of Israel, those left in the land, making an alliance with Egypt. This is the part of the chapter that I have included. The Babylonians have planted them by the fertile river of the Euphrates and that is where they must grow for a time. The Egyptians, the other eagle in the parable, will fail them and they will wither and die. God himself will uproot them.

If you have studied the history of the fall of Jerusalem, you know that this is just what happened. The Babylonians sought to tame the rebellious Jews by taking away the leadership. But it did not work. A few years later they did rebel again and again. The result was that the Exile actually happened in stages as the Babylonians sought first a limited exile and then a much broader exile and finally chased the last of the people off into Egypt. Throughout this time, Ezekiel is pleading with them to accept the exile as God's just punishment and to abandon their hopes for a speedy return. You can imagine this did not endear him to them.

Our verses are really Ezekiel telling them that God himself will replant the tree in its proper place. The remnant which has been planted in Babylon will be preserved and serve to be the stock from which God will restore the nation in his time. We should not be about trying the solutions ourselves.

This will go very nicely with the parables that Jesus tells in the Gospel lessons.

This is the image of God who does the impossible. He turns the world on its head. The world's solutions to problems are not God's solutions. He plants the sprig from a tree. That should not work. One does not propagate a cedar tree that way. But God does. And this little branch, this remnant which no one thinks is worth anything, God turns into something great. The world will not understand this. Don't try to explain it to them and expect their consent. God will simply do it.

Psalm 1

Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,

nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

² but his delight is in the law of the LORD,

and on his law he meditates day and night.

³ He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.

⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶ for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

This little wisdom psalm initiates the whole book of Psalms and deserves a bit of special attention. It and the psalm which follows are the only ones without a superscription. This is a wonderful study in parallelism, the primary poetic form of Hebrew. Notice how he compares things and lays them side by side so that in contrast and parallels you always come deeper into this.

There is a little ambiguity in the first verse. Clearly there some sort of progression going on, but what is the direction? Walking and then Standing and then Sitting looks like it is going from active to less active, then to passive. So the fellow who actually does the evil, is then contrasted with the one who stands up for the evil, versus the one who simply sits by while the evil is done. It could also go the opposite way. If you think of a king's court, likely the setting where these were composed, the people walking about are the servants, the ones standing are the advisors and the guy sitting is the king. His involvement in the evil is actually much greater than the underlings who are doing it, he is listening to the advisors and planning the evil.

The Psalmist notices that the wicked will not last, they are like the chaff. The righteous man is like a tree, hence the connection to the OT lesson for the day. Planted by the water he thrives no matter how great the drought. He always bears fruit.

Please notice that the thing being compared in the last couplet. He does not say the wicked man will perish and the righteous man will prosper, but it is the way of the wicked man which will perish. The Lord knows the ways of the righteous man. Notice the righteous man may not know it as well as God. Does this mean God knows the way of salvation/righteousness and he leads us upon it? Does this point perhaps to Christ who walked that path for us? Does it say that all the other avenues, the ways of the wicked, will perish? Is that in fact really, really good news? Does it suggest that there is hope for wicked people – their way may perish but it does not say that they do?

II Corinthians 5:1-10 (11-17)

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. ¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

We live by faith, not by sight – the old has gone, the new has come. This passage, building on last week’s lesson, speaks of a deep and interesting mystery of the kingdom. It actually corresponds nicely to the mustard seed parable we find in the Gospel reading for the day. Paul enjoins us to see with the eyes of Christ, as he has been given to see. Even death itself has ceased to be a terror for Paul, it has become simply another way of describing the life that is hidden in Jesus. He longs for the day when that life is all there is to see, not by faith but by sight. But he does not have to wait until the resurrection to see it either. He has seen that life in the restored relationship he now enjoys with the Corinthians after their bitter fight. That forgiveness and their renewed love for him is a glimpse of heaven itself.

For Paul, this hope means he is of good courage. That is a most interesting word. It is the same root as our word cardiac. It is all about heart. He believes and that gives him heart, substance for this life. It also means he really doesn't care what happens to him. Laugh if you will, kill him if you must, but the reality in which he walks through Christ is utterly beyond the world's ability to affect. He is in Christ, and you cannot change that. The love of Christ controls him now. He no longer lives for himself so his own mortal life is no longer the most precious gift. Jesus is that gift and nothing the world does can take that away from him, not even the executioner's sword.

This also means that Paul sees no one from the perspective of flesh, although once he did see even Jesus that way. Now, everyone is different, believer and unbeliever alike. They are a new creation – Christ has died for them and that changes everything. The old has gone, the new has come, they are no longer the enemy but everyone is a potential friend in Christ. Paul seems to have lived this out. When he was in Corinth on the second missionary journey, the Jews of the Synagogue in Corinth tried to do to Paul what the Jews in Jerusalem did to Jesus, kill him with a Roman sword. When their case failed (Acts 18) they turned on their leader and beat him publically. It appears that that the only one who befriended him was Paul. By the time Paul writes the first letter of the Corinthians, he calls him "brother." (see I Cor 1:1)

Paul is really a mustard seed. He is about to be planted in martyrdom. But how many St. Paul Lutheran Church's there are in the LCMS? See how many people roost in the branches of Paul's faith? See how broad that mustard seed, planted in hope, has grown to be?

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶ And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰ And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² 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."

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. ³⁴ He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

³⁵ *On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."*

³⁶ *And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹ And they*

were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Jesus tells two parables today. They really need to be read in the context of the earlier Parable of the Sower which was immediately precedes this pericope and what I like to call the interlude, as well as the following verses which I have included for you. We are all familiar with the Parable of the Sower, unfortunately we have often heard it as an exhortation to be good dirt. I don't think that is the point there. I think Mark is writing for a group of discouraged Christians. They are being persecuted and wondering what is up with all the terrible things that are happening to them. They are asking some questions of themselves and God. Have they angered God? Have they hitched their cart to the wrong horse? Has God been defeated or is he powerless to save them? Are they being persecuted because they have somehow not gotten the secret code correct? What should they take away from this persecution? We addressed this in the notes last week as well.

Mark says some very specific things to that situation today. He says that the word itself, though it is good, it is not always successful. In fact, in the Parable of the Sower, it only works about 25% of the time. The fact that one is being persecuted, perhaps by the very people you sought to evangelize, is not a sign of the failure of the kingdom. It is normal. That we have been rejected by people and our message has not won over every heart is not a sign of God's failure it is the way that the kingdom simply works.

The interlude, which immediately precedes these verses is also worth noting. In these triplets, these little interludes often serve to give important clues to the purpose of the triplet, and here we get a pretty big clue. Jesus is talking about our sowing:

²¹ And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? ²² For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” ²⁴ And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. ²⁵ For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

Notice, the Gospel must shine forth, but there is also a warning in here. If you dribble out the good news, it will be dribbled out to you too. If you are generous, so too will the generosity be poured back to you.

But if this proclamation of the Good News it is not bearing fruit right now, we might be tempted to think that we have somehow messed this up. Have we not tended the kingdom properly? Have we failed to water that seed at the proper time, to cultivate it and keep the weeds down? My father used to talk about something called cultivator blight. That is when the farmer got sleepy on the tractor and started to uproot the crop instead of the weeds he was after. He often muttered

it after I was seen walking out of the garden with a hoe, but I don't know what that was about. The idea here is that sometimes the things we do to care for a plant can be detrimental to it. If you water Pacific Madrona trees during a summer drought they will die. They need the drought. If you put too much fertilizer on your lawn you can kill it.

The parable of the seed that grows automatically addresses this fear. The truth is really rather simple. The kingdom grows when God makes it grow, it is a mysterious and marvelous thing which the farmer, the sower, really does not understand or affect. He plants the seed, goes to bed and pretty soon the stuff has sprouted. He doesn't know how but he counts on it happening. The word used in the text is really interesting for us. Mark says the word sprouts "automatike" this is the transliteration of the word "automatic." That is how the word grows, on auto-pilot.

Of course this flies in the face of many of the things that we get from our district evangelism offices and the many consultants who feed off the fears of congregations who perceive themselves in a decline. If we put in the right program, change the Sunday worship, hire a youth director, then we will grow or at least hold the status quo. But the kingdom of God resists such manipulation. There is no easy answer to this question. It seems that the problem is most likely a failure to sow. God gives the growth, we are simply tasked as sowers of the seed. He will see to the sprout and the growth. But as the preceding parable suggested, even sowing is not a guarantee. The seed grows of its own, but we do not control it nor can we manipulate it.

Now, one probably needs to remember that God thinks in bigger terms than just our little congregational kingdoms. He delights when anyone believes in Jesus, not just Lutherans, and we will find much peace in realizing that as well. The kingdom of God does not depend on me or my congregation succeeding. He is quite capable of pulling off Christianity and the Christian Church without Lutherans.

But that said, I am not sure that radically distorting our ministry, especially our worship, into something which is alien to ourselves is the way to go. I am not sure that we can or would even want to manipulate people into church that way. This generation is hypersensitive to hypocrisy. If they see us worshipping like we don't believe it, they will pick up on that in a heartbeat. If we have all the right songs but no love in our hearts for them, then we will be worse off than if we had simply kept on singing the same old hymns.

This parable reminds us that the growth of the kingdom, whether that is our own parish or the whole kingdom of God, is something that God does. We are sowers of the seed, we can find winsome and beautiful ways to broadcast that message and that word, but he will grant the growth. There are no guarantees and there are no ways we can 'make it happen.'

Perhaps we really need to remember that we are sowers of the Word, not the makers of Christians. God makes Christians. Does the misbelief that this is my job keep me from sowing? If I understand that I am supposed to succeed in this sowing task, that is to make a Christian, does

that prevent me from even starting because I really have not a clue about how to make a Christian?

As opposed to Mark's audience, is our fear really that we don't have anything to say that people want to hear? Does our own shallowness of faith keep us quiet, lest we open our mouth and they discover that we really are clueless and pretty shallow?

Or do we feel a greater fear? Perhaps we fear for our children and grandchildren who have left the church? I have often heard members beat themselves up because they feel that they have failed in raising their children in the faith. I may be a lousy sower, but God has given me good seed, seed that works mysteriously and automatically. God's word does not return to him empty, but it accomplishes what he sets out for it to do. We have a great hope and comfort to give these people, but we might need to reach back into the parable of the sower for that.

The hope of this parable seems to be that our lives have always been sowing. Ever since the day of my baptism God has been at work in my heart and life, I may not have always lived it well, but God does use even me as a sower. God has hidden this thing in me, he has hidden it in me so that he may make it manifest. He has been sowing through me. He will make this work – the seed is sometimes the humble and penitent "I'm Sorry!" that I say.

The second parable in our reading which is also the third parable in the triplet is then necessary. The mustard seed looks like nothing. It is a little bitty thing. There are actually smaller seeds, but the mustard is not much of a seed. It grows into a significant plant. How does God get all that big stuff in that little package? We can talk about DNA and photosynthesis and the rest of biology, but the truth is, there is a miracle of sorts in every seed.

The same thing is true for the Word. We can sometimes look at the problems we face, the world in which we live, and we can turn to the message we proclaim and despair because the message seems so inadequate to the task. How can I proclaim the bread of life when there are so many hungry people? How can I preach peace when there is so much hurt and strife and the problems seem so intractable? How can I walk into a world which has run off its moral track when I am just a little old lady or a simply farmer or a not very eloquent computer programmer who has a hard time getting a date? Big problems, we have learned, require big solutions. If you want to solve the problem of world hunger you will need money, lots of money, maybe the Army and National Guard, the United Nations, we will have to raise taxes and set up a whole bureaucracy. But when God wants to help the starving of Calcutta he sent a 4'10" in Albanian nun named Theresa. When he wanted to overturn the sick culture of the Roman empire he sent out a dozen illiterate fisherman and tax collectors and other bottom of the rung sorts of folks. When he wanted to challenge Satan's power and overturn sin and death, he strapped a wooden cross on a Nazareth carpenter's back and killed him.

The kingdom just cannot be judged by the cover, by what you see. The carpenter on the cross is the Lord of life, the twelve apostles don't look like much but who can name the first twelve

emperors of Rome beyond a few classicists in dusty university offices. Peter, James and John would change the world far more than Nerva, Hadrian or Trajan or even Augustus.

And us? God sows his word through us. We don't look like much. We might be way too gray and out of the youth culture. We might be considered terribly politically incorrect and we probably don't have a bunch of money in our pockets. But God has imbued our preaching with cosmic significance and the possibility that we will change the world. We so in that hope.

Illustration: When I was a young pastor, we elected to open a food bank with several of the neighboring Christian congregations in Davis, County Utah. This was heavy Mormon territory and we were all small parishes, about six of us. We polled our congregations and decided that we could probably give twenty families two bags of groceries per month. It would be a small operation, but we decided to do it.

Within a year, even though our people never gave more than those twenty bags of groceries, we were feeding nearly two hundred families. A few members really got behind this and went out and asked local grocers to help. One of the parishioners was a postal worker and they elected to support the food bank with a food drive. (They can haul a lot of food in one of those little trucks!) Fortunately the UCC church where we hosted this has an otherwise little used gymnasium. We stacked this court five and six feet deep with boxes of food. Even the Mormons started helping out. They had commercial packing facilities to support their requirement that every home have a 1 year supply of food. So several wards adopted our food bank as a service project, packaging up untold boxes of corn flakes and other cereals.

It did not look like much when we opened our doors and invited hungry people to come in. But before long we were a significant source of food for lots of families on the edge of hunger in that community. Like a mustard seed cast into the ground, it did not look like much. But God gave growth where no one expected it and many hungry birds came to roost in those branches.

Law

1. I am afraid – I am afraid that my church is dying, that my money will not be enough, that my life is ending and all sorts of terrible things will happen. I am afraid.
2. That fear drives me to act, and sometimes those actions are even worse than the fear itself. Like the people in Ezekiel's time, I think I need to help God along in his promises and when I do that I make a royal mess of things.
3. That fear also causes me to doubt the efficacy of my preaching, my service, this whole Kingdom of God. It looks like Christianity is in retreat in North America, my congregation is shrinking, getting older. Is this because the kingdom of God has failed?

4. That fear blinds me to reality. I cannot see the world as Paul sees it in the Epistle lesson. I only see the little mustard seed, the old man, the broken down sinful world, and I cannot see how it can change or ever be any different.
5. Discouraged and hopeless, I may despair, or I may simply slog along out of some hopeless sense of duty and pig-headed stubbornness. But there is no real joy in my ministry or my life; it is a going through motions in which I have no confidence and no faith. There is no joy or expectation in that. What should be a joy has become a job.

Gospel

1. Jesus knows my fear, he has come to address my fear and the Bible was written to calm and comfort me. God's Word tells me what I need to know that I do not need to be afraid. It assures me that the end of this story is always good, because Jesus has risen from the dead and conquered all my foes, even death.
2. Now, confident of how this story ends, I can start of act out of love and hope instead of fear. I can listen to God's promises and his Word and let him be God and I will be the person he has created and redeemed me to be.
3. I can preach and let God be the one who causes the growth. It is his Word, not mine, it is His kingdom not mine. I need never doubt his undying and abiding love for everyone, even the people who have listened to me and turned away. He will seek them out and find them.
4. This courage allows me to see the whole world differently. I am sowing a seed, it looks small, it doesn't look like it should work, but I operate by faith and not by sight. I know that this is God's word and not my own, he will make it happen. God has lots of power and loves to make the little and weak things great and powerful. It is his really bizarre marketing plan, and it works. He took an 80 year old stutterer like Moses and made him a prophet. He took a fearful fisherman and made him a rock. He took a lot less than we are and did amazing things with even less.
5. This gives hope to my preaching and to this ministry. It gives beautiful expectation to the lives we live in Christ. I may be a janitor or stuck in a cubicle all day with a computer screen and a mountain of code to write, but God can and does give meaning and purpose to my life. He fills the words I say and the deeds I do with the potentiality of his presence. I am a mustard seed cast into this world. It works because God makes it work, it doesn't look like it should, but it does work.

Sermon Ideas

1. A fully Automatic Mustard Seed (That the hearer would believe that God has this ministry and my whole life in His competent hands. He loves to work through things that

are weak and small, as I am weak and small. He promises that his seed sometimes works amazing things so I can sow in hope.)

We love to “own” the Church, but it has always been God’s Church. That is both the bad news and the good news in one sentence. When I own it, I am responsible. I get the blame when it doesn’t work, I carry the burden. That sounds awful but so does the alternative. My old sinful self rebels against the idea that I am not in control. I want power, I want control. But the good news is also that God is in control. He is so much better at this stuff than I am. He is capable. The old sinner must die, but he will die anyway, regardless. Might as well drown him right now in baptismal water.

In combining the two parables, this sermon addresses the fears which I have highlighted earlier in this study, especially the fear that many congregations have that they are failures and somehow their current predicament is their own fault, either from a wrathful God or their own incompetence. It is a good time to give a frank assessment of the whole thing. Don’t sugar coat this, or you will dilute the gospel. The fact is that we don’t look like much. But that is exactly the sort of seed that God plants. We probably have screwed things up, but then again, fertile soil is filled with dead and decaying things. God will make this happen. He tasks us with the job of being sowers, not fruiterers, not growers, not producers, but sowers. He will see to the rest of those things. We cannot guarantee specific results or the results that I think are supposed to be there, but we can eagerly expect and look forward to the results he will define and deliver because he has promised them to us. This parable teaches us to let God be the one who defines success. Our institutional success may not be the same thing as kingdom success. Kingdom success is God’s to define and it might be the growth of another institution, but it will result in the growth of the kingdom of God. I believe that when we are seeing to the kingdom concerns, God will take care of the institution because it is furthering his kingdom. He does not change the kingdom to serve the institution, but he does use institutions to serve the kingdom. The institutions may pass, thousands of congregations die every year, but the kingdom of God continues. Heck, even Lutheranism might pass away, but the kingdom of God will still be there (heresy!)

There is another piece to this. If I take up God’s task, try to carry this congregation and its growth on my shoulders, put the institution before the kingdom, then I am apt to be working contrary to the kingdom. Should we expect that God will bless that? Do we invite people to church so we can balance a budget or so we can feel good about ourselves? Or do we invite folks to church because Jesus is here and they really need what he has to give them in this place? If they go to another place where they encounter Jesus, are we just as happy? These are good questions for the preacher to ask this day when you come to this parable.

This sermon will best proclaim faith to the folks who are sitting before us. We hope in Jesus, we do not trust in our abilities or some other resource, but we trust in Jesus above all. The world laughs at us and many would tempt us to trust another, but Jesus is the seed of this kingdom. He works automatically. He works great things. He does the work, not another, not me, not a program, not another thing.

2. By faith, not by sight – the new has come the old is gone. (Epistle - That the hearer would look upon him/herself, neighbors, fellow congregants, and even the whole community with Christ's vision. There is no sin for which he has not died, there is no death he has not undone, and there is no tear he cannot dry.)

The Christian is called upon to enter this world with hope. My now retired colleague, Herb Hoefler, often said that we under-rate that part of our Christianity. In India where the Dalits are the downtrodden untouchables of the caste system, Christianity has thrived because it has given them hope. He says you can just about tell a Christian by the way they walk down the street. They stride, they look up - they have hope. We too are called upon to engage in ministry in hope. Paul in the Epistle lesson today does not see the world the way he used to see it. He admits that once he even saw Jesus this way, but now he sees things differently, there is a new normal operating in his life. He has courage and confidence because he knows that his life is now tied up with Christ's life. It is out of the reach of all his foes. He can speak boldly, act bravely, laugh at danger and shake off the scorn and ridicule of the world. They may see him as a mustard seed, but he knows better. Christ, God himself, dwells within him. He has hope and that hope gives him courage. We have hope, a hope which also gives us courage.

For the congregation of people in North America, this is hard to hear. We have been told over and over that religion is a bad subject, that our faith does not belong in the public discourse of our community, that it is a private thing, unwelcome in the world. This is exactly what they were saying to Mark's community and likely in the days of Paul too.

Paul wrote these words in the context of a profound forgiving act. He was overjoyed by it and could not keep quiet about it all. We too have been given the same forgiveness which empowered Paul. Have we perhaps grown blasé about it because our sins are forgiven every week? It is time to open our eyes and see what God has put before us today. The absolution we speak, the Sacrament, the community of people, this is a Divine moment. It empowers us.

It is also time to put this beautiful gift into practice in our own lives, especially as we deal with one another. If we join Paul in seeing people with these new eyes, we cannot turn around and hold a grudge. We cannot even score or nurse our anger over some past hurt.

Jesus has died for all and that reality must shine in our lives, words, deeds, and relationship.

Here you will need an illustration, preferably something that connects to the people of your community. A dear and recently departed saint who was a dynamo of Christian service would serve well. Perhaps there is someone in your community or personal experience who exemplifies what we are talking about here. Point out that person. Put skin and flesh and bones on this idea.

3. Roosting (not roasting) in the Branches of God's Kingdom (Gospel and OT– that the hearer would perceive of the Church's mission of hospitality to sinners of every stripe – welcomed into the warm embrace of Christ in this place, forgiven, we are also the welcoming branches of his church – welcoming the community into this place.)

Ezekiel said the whole world would look at this thing that God was doing and praise him. The church – the people of God – are the amazing thing that God has created and done.

This sermon addresses the church which has become a self-serving community, a country club church, which is a refuge for its own members, but has forgotten that Christ has put them there to be the light of the world, the proclaimer of a kingdom of God's grace and peace to all. The angels sang "peace on earth, good will to all." Do we sing, "be like us and you too can be saved." Do we put hurdles in front of people who are looking for resting and roosting places?

Jesus speaks of a kingdom today that started very small, a mustard seed, 12 fisherman, a few women, a handful of people. You might reference the readings of a few weeks ago which spoke of 120 folks, then 3000, then more, but today it is indeed a mighty tree. Some two billion people claim Jesus as savior today. 100,000 new converts are made today.

That happens because God's people are welcoming sinners, forgiving them, loving them. God's kingdom extends its branches out into this world in a loving embrace. God works amazing miracles through that love this day too. His kingdom grows automatically. It grows potently.

Of course, the parables also insist that this is God's and not my kingdom. I cannot filter out the undesirables, excluding those who do not fit my vision for this congregation. God has a penchant for calling some pretty interesting and difficult people. Some will smell badly, others will be ill-educated. Of course there will be sinners in the mix. God has always had a thing for calling sinners. His kingdom grows automatically and potently, but not by any rules or maxims that conform to our human sensibilities. He is the babe of Bethlehem who did not call Rabbis and Pharisees to his side but pagan wise men from the East to bring him gifts and smelly shepherds from the flocks. This is Jesus' kingdom who was chastised for eating with prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners. This is Jesus

who saved every criminal by dying a criminal's death. He shook Peter's smelly hands and ate with Zacchaeus. Who will he bring to the kingdom today?