

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

I know many people love stories and the people who tell them. I'm not a good storyteller. Garrison Keillor is; he's perhaps the best known bard of our day. You know him. He's the humorist that often made fun of the "Minnesootans" around Lake Wobegon. That was a fictional place "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." Keillor was a great storyteller, and his stories made you laugh. But don't really ask, "What does this mean?" Their point was not to instruct you, but to tickle you.

I'm not a good storyteller, but Jesus was. You heard a couple of His today. Jesus told parables, but unlike Keillor, Jesus' parables were not meant to entertain you and make you laugh. They had a dual purpose: both to instruct and to obscure. Indeed, Jesus told His disciples, "*To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand'*" (Mark 4:11-12).

Jesus' parables are not so easy to understand. It takes work to understand them. Their meaning doesn't lie readily on the surface. It's not plain speaking, and when, shortly before He was crucified, Jesus stopped using figures of speech, the disciples rejoiced: "*Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God*" (John 16:29-30). Up until that time, they needed Jesus to explain the parables to them, and they often asked Him. As we heard in the Gospel, "*[Jesus] did not speak to [the crowd that flocked to Him] without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything*" (Mark 4:34).

So today, we consider the two parables we heard Jesus tell, and we ask the Lutheran question, "What does this mean?" Jesus helps us out with these parables. Unlike in the first parable that Jesus told (which is probably the best known of His parables), the Parable of the Sower, where Jesus just begins, "*a sower went out to sow*" (Mark 4:3), here Jesus tells us, these parables are about the kingdom of God. "*The kingdom of God is as if*" That helps.

"*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.*" Jesus often uses agricultural themes in His parables. "*[The man] sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself*"

To understand this parable, we must know who the man is and what the seed is. Jesus' previous explanation of the Parable of the Sower helps us. The man is God, and the seed is His word. Here Jesus is explaining the mystery of the kingdom of

God, of the Church, that is, of believers. We become believers when the seed of the Word of God is planted, and it sprouts and grows — and it does so all on its own, without any intervention on our part. Indeed, it's all the work of God.

This is what we confess as Lutherans, that “through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news,” and that good news is this: “that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake” (Augustana, V). Or in the Catechism, it's not by our “own reason or strength,” but “the Holy Spirit has called [us] by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts,” etc.

St. Peter says it this way, “*you have been born again—that's Baptism language—not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.*” And that word can be delivered naked as a spoken word, or clothed in water. Either way, through this word the Holy Spirit gives you the rebirth that sprouts life and the renewal that forgives sins and bears the fruit of love. This faith grows, “*first the blade,*” and matures, “*then the ear,*” and bears fruit, “*then the full grain in the ear,*” just as God desires.

Yes, the life of faith that sprouts up from this seed may find itself in different stages at various points in your life — the blade, the ear, the full grain. Though a Christian, it is easy to be “*tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes*” (Eph. 4:14). That's what the devil wants — by cunning and deceit, he seeks to toss you about and thereby uproot you.

Thus the importance not only of coming to faith, but remaining faithful. Yes, God has given you His Word, but it is more than seed; it is also the water that comes down from heaven, from the mouth of the Lord—to make the seed grow and bear fruit. That's what God intends.

Thus, also He has given you shepherds and teachers, that is, pastors to equip you, to minister to you, to build you up, until you attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, until you reach mature manhood, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13), as St. Paul would say it. Or again as St. Paul says, “*as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving*” (Col. 2:7).

The word of God is more than just seed that sprouts forth life; it is the water that sustains you in that life, that roots you in the true faith, that you being faithful unto death (unto the harvest) might receive the crown of life.

The second parable is of a mustard seed — small and insignificant, and yet when it grows into a plant becomes large and full and gives a place for the birds to nest.

What’s the point here? This parable speaks of another reality of the kingdom — from what kind of seed is the kingdom of God grown! Here the seed is the seed of woman, a baby conceived of a virgin mother without the aid of a human husband, born among the sheep and oxen for there was no room for Him; an infant attended by shepherds; a child fleeing for His life to a foreign country, a child that grew up in relative obscurity in a little Galilean town; a man whose own brothers and hometown rejected Him, who, though He did many wondrous signs, had a relatively small following; a man despised and rejected by the religious leaders, who had Him ruthlessly put to death, to die with criminals and thieves, with mocking and spitting; a man who even in death had no place to lay His head in life or in death, and was laid in a borrowed tomb.

Yes, this humble seed of woman died and was planted in the ground, and as He foretold elsewhere, this seed now brings forth much fruit—it is the Church, built up on more seed spread by lowly sinners, fishermen who want to exalt themselves, a fisherman who denies Jesus, despised tax collectors, doubters, skeptics, cowards, and finally persecutors. Yet upon their testimony is the Church built—upon the proclamation of the scandal and foolishness of Christ crucified, and the testimony that God raised Him from the dead. The church is built on the foolish preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. What small and insignificant seed that is, and yet, from it has grown the Christian church on earth, larger than all the garden plants with many large branches.

And in the shadow of these branches nest many birds—“*Jews or Greeks*” “*all [who are] baptized into [the] one body [of Christ]*” “*in [the] one Spirit*” (1 Cor. 12:13), chicks dwelling in the place of the Lord of hosts, abiding in “*the shadow of His wings*” and singing for joy.

Dear friends, you are these birds; these are your nests, for you are of this seed—though seemingly insignificant, and oh, so less appealing than the seeds so often sown by the enemy that want to sprout and take root in our lives, that want to crowd out the good plant. Repent, and return ever to this mustard seed—to Christ and the message of Him crucified and risen for you, planted once in baptism, and watered there; watered also and growing by the word of the apostles and prophets, pruned by the preaching of the law, healed by the preaching of the Gospel, fed by Supper of Christ’s body and blood.

You are a mighty planting of the Lord, though the seed from which you sprouted may seem insignificant. To paraphrase St. Paul, boast in this insignificance, “*so that the power of Christ may rest upon [you].*” Be “*content*

with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when you are in Christ, though [you are] weak, then [you are] strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10). For Christ is the noble cedar, the Lord’s planting on the mountain height of Calvary. On this mountain, He made the dry tree of the cross bud and flourish into life, and this is your life.

And I’m telling you this plainly, and not in figurative language, that you might believe. It’s not your doing—not your faith, and not your life. It’s His. You are weak. He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves you, and He is the Lord; He is the Word; He has done it.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.