

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In May's Voice of Zion, I told you about a Gallup survey that reported that "[i]n the U.S. in 2020, only '47% of U.S. adults belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque.'" That's the first time that number has dropped below 50%. Indeed, the survey showed "the percentage of adults claiming church membership has dropped precipitously" in the last ten years.

The report is a bit disheartening. We want to see a grand and glorious Church, and yet, the Church today perhaps seems in decline, a shadow of its former grandeur. Of course, things are not always as they appear.

Perhaps the Church in America is in decline, but the Church in America is not the Church writ large. There is no promise that any particular congregation will survive — consider the great churches of Asia Minor that Paul planted. Consider Constantinople, once the center of Christendom; its great Hagia Sophia is a mosque. So Luther once implored the Germans: "O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. ... you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay" (LW 45:352).

Nevertheless, the Church herself, built on the Rock, will stand even when steeples are falling. This is what Jesus is talking about today as He teaches us about the Kingdom of God — not His Kingdom of Power or His Kingdom of Glory as we say in the catechism, but His Kingdom of Grace, ruled by His grace. He is speaking of the Church, and the Church is a bit of a mystery.

"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground," Jesus begins the first of His two parables. Mark says, *"privately to his own disciples [Jesus] explained everything,"* but Mark doesn't share this explanation to us. Nevertheless, following on from Jesus' explanation of His earlier Parable of the Sower, we can infer that the seed again represents His word. So, Jesus sows the word, but the rest is rather mysterious: the germination of the seed — we would call that faith; and its growth and production of fruit — that's growth in the faith and the fruit of faith; until the harvest — perseverance in the faith. Jesus says, the man goes to sleep and gets up, and all this happens mysteriously, he *"knows not how."*

Of course, it happens through the sowing of Christ's word. St. Paul says, *"faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ"* (Rom. 10:17) — and that happens especially through preaching. Again, St. Paul: *"how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without*

someone preaching?” (Rom. 10:14). We know little more than that, for we’re a bit of “a black box” — the rest of it is hidden from our eyes. It’s a bit mysterious.

And not just by preaching does Christ’s word come to us and faith germinate in us. The water and the Spirit of Holy Baptism also deliver Christ’s word to us, whereby we are delivered into the Kingdom of God (John 3:5) — into the Church by faith. But it’s still rather mysterious, and we have to trust Jesus’ word, for the church is not seen but believed. For *“faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”* (Heb. 11:1). Luther writes, “the church is a high and deeply hidden thing so that no one can recognize or know it, but you must apprehend and believe it solely by [its] Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the [divine] Word” (Luther’s writing ‘Against Johnny Sausage [Hans Wurst],’ Halle edition, 17:1678, quoted in Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 41).

This faith, of course, is the work of God. The Spirit is in that washing, working this *“regeneration and renewal”* (Tit. 3:5). The Spirit is in that *“water with the word”* (Eph. 5:26) causing both child and adult alike to be begotten into the Kingdom of God. St. Peter told the people on Pentecost that, being baptized, *“you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:38). And in his first epistle He says: *“[a]ccording to his great mercy, [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope”* (1 Pet. 1:3), and this rebirth *“is not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God”* (1 Pet. 1:23).

This is the way we confess it as Lutherans, too. *“I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him”* (Luther, Small Catechism, 3rd article). It’s not my work; it’s God’s work. He’s the One who makes alive (Eph. 2:4-5). He’s the One who makes *“the dry tree flourish.”* He Himself is the One who promises: *“I have spoken, and I will do it.”*

It’s especially God the Holy Spirit who is “the Lord and Giver of life” (Nicene Creed). The Holy Spirit “works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news” (Augsburg Confession, V:2), and other than this planting of the seed, we know not how, for *“the Spirit breathes where He wills, and you hear His voice, but you do not know from where He comes or where He goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”* (Weinrich translation, John 3:8): *“first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.”*

The Church is in view in the second parable, too, of a mustard seed. Far from grandiose and magnificent in the world’s eyes, the Church seems small and insignificant, and yet actually, because she is built on Him who was planted into the ground and dies (John 12:24), she becomes large and full of branches where birds of all sorts come to nest, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, for appearances can be deceiving.

This is the Kingdom of God, built on Christ, surely the lowliest of seeds, born of a humble virgin, fleeing for His life, growing up in obscurity, despised and rejected by those He came to save. He came down from heaven to us to be planted a green tree on the mountain height of Israel as Ezekiel prophesied, and yet, for our salvation, the Lord brought this tree low and dried Him up in death. But from this dry tree would spring forth life again — resurrection and life. It is green again, and it flourishes, spreading its branches and drawing Jew and Gentile alike unto itself, that we might nest in its branches and eat of its fruit — body and blood given and shed for you.

Jesus teaches us in parables today — and the prophet does, too. To be sure, everything in the parables doesn't match up perfectly with each other, but there is a common theme of mystery and hiddenness in them: the Kingdom of God, His kingdom of grace, the Church, is an article of faith for this “one holy Church” is the congregation of believers whose faith is wrought by the Holy Spirit as they are taught and nourished by the Gospel and Sacraments (Augsburg Confession VII:1). And this kingdom has a greatness hidden in lowliness, for this kingdom is Christ's and is built on Him, and beyond all appearances, it is truly glorious.

Therefore, rejoice. Regardless what the surveys say or our deceiving eyes tell us, the word still lives and abides with us (1 Pet. 1:23), the Holy Spirit is still busy calling and gathering believers, Christ is still active building His Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her (Matt. 16:18).

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