

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In recent weeks, we heard how the Pharisees and scribes were seeking to destroy Jesus, and last Sunday, we heard them accuse Him of being in league with Satan, a scurrilous accusation.

In response to these attacks, Jesus began to teach the people using parables, in a way, veiling his message of salvation until the time was ripe for Him to fulfill that salvific mission. This was the purpose of His teaching in parables, Jesus said: that *“they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand”* (Mark 4:12).

Jesus started with the famous parable of the sower, which you know well. And you remember also that He had to explain it to the disciples (Mark 4:14ff). They didn’t get it right away either, for they weren’t yet used to this kind of teaching.

Jesus continued with the two parables we have in this week’s Gospel. Although not the same, these two parables have similar themes, and with them, Jesus seeks to encourage us in the church.

These parables are “kingdom parables”; they’re about the church, for the church on earth is God’s kingdom here. But contrary to popular accusations, the church does not seek worldly power; this kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of grace; He has called His church to distribute His grace.

The church does not seek to rule or lord over others; the church ministers, that is, she has been called to serve, even as Christ came to serve and give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

The church is not something one pays his way into by money or influence; one is called into the church by the word of God and by the waters of Holy Baptism, called humbly to repent of our sins and be forgiven, called to trust in Christ Jesus.

The church is the congregation of the faithful, gathered around the word of God and His gifts. She is not grandiose; she is humble. Indeed, she is invisible, hidden from our sight. Jesus says, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” That is, the kingdom of God is not a worldly kingdom but a spiritual one, and she “begins by faith.” (C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 38). And as faith cannot be seen, so the church cannot be seen — yet, she is not imaginary; she is most real.

Now by what we see, the church often seems to be weak and ineffective. Luther said: “[W]e rightly confess in the Creed and say: ‘I believe a holy Christian church.’ For it is invisible and lives in the Spirit at a place to which no one can come. Hence, it is impossible to see its holiness. For God often covers and veils it

so much with weakness, sin, and error and with many tribulations and offenses that we can find it nowhere with our senses' (Comment on Galatians 5:19, Halle edition, 8:2745)" (quoted in Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 41). But beyond all observations, Jesus teaches otherwise in His kingdom parables.

Jesus begins the first of the two parables before us with: "*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.*" Like in the Parable of the Sower, the scattered seed represents the word of God proclaimed. In this parable, however, the man "*sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself*" automatically.

This is the way of the church. We preach the word of God. There doesn't seem to be anything special about it. We might even think that we need to do something to help this word along. But no! The word of God is simply planted in the hearts of hearers; it sprouts and grows all on its own; we know not how. It's a bit mysterious.

St. Paul takes this topic up in Romans. He says: "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (Rom. 10:17) — and we hear that word especially through preaching. Paul also said: "*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). That's the sowing of the seed, but Paul like Jesus does not tell us how this faith germinates and grows. Truly, when it comes to faith, we're a bit of "a black box"; after the preaching, everything else is hidden from our eyes.

It's mysterious; it's miraculous, for it's the work of God. God the Holy Spirit does it. "He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news" (Augsburg Confession, V:2).

This sowing of Christ's word happens in preaching as we heard, but also in the word combined with the waters of Holy Baptism and poured onto us. By this Sacrament, too, we are mysteriously, miraculously delivered into the Kingdom of God (John 3:5) — into the Church by faith. That's the promise. We must trust the promise, for the church is not seen, but believed. "*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).

God is the One who promises: "*I have spoken, and I will do it.*" God is neither weak nor ineffective. He is the One who makes "*the dry tree flourish.*" He is the One who makes alive (Eph. 2:4-5).

The Church is in view in the second parable, too, that of a mustard seed. Again, far from grandiose and magnificent in the world's eyes, the Church seems small and insignificant, and yet, because she is built on Him who was planted into the ground and died (John 12:24), she becomes large and full of branches where birds of all sorts come to nest. It seems otherwise, but appearances can be deceiving.

This too is the Kingdom of God, the church, built on the Good News of Christ. Surely He was 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. This tree is green again. 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 — the body and blood of Christ given and shed for you.

Thus Jesus teaches us in parables today — and the prophet does, too — instructing us of the mysterious, miraculous Kingdom of God, His kingdom of grace, the church. It's an article of faith, this "one holy Church" is. We believe it, for it is not visible to our eyes. On the other hand, the church does have identifying marks, for the church is the congregation of believers whose faith has been wrought in them by the Holy Spirit as they are taught and nourished by the Gospel and Sacraments (Augsburg Confession VII:1). And beyond all appearances, this kingdom has a greatness to it — hidden in lowliness and humility, to be sure — and a glory that is yet to be revealed, for this kingdom is Christ's, and it is built on Him who died but rose again triumphant. His word lives and abides with us (1 Pet. 1:23); the Holy Spirit is still busy calling and gathering believers; Christ is at work, still building His church; and the gates of hell will not prevail against her (Matt. 16:18).

Therefore, let us hope in faith. Be encouraged in Christ Jesus, now and for eternity.

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