

“Evergreen and Ever Growing”

Mark 4:26-34, Proper 6-B, June 17, 2018

“O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree! How lovely are your branches!” is a Christmas carol that many of us are familiar with! Originally written in German, however, this lovely little carol always seems to suffer some loss in its translation!

One of the best English renditions of “O Tannenbaum” I’ve ever heard, was sung back in the 1980’s by that dear lady, Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, who sang: “Your boughs so green in summertime, stay bravely green in wintertime!”

The original text is: “Du gruenst nicht nur zur Sommerzeit; nein, auch im Winter wenn es schneit!” Translated, most literally: “You radiate this beautiful green color not only in the summertime, but also in the winter when it snows!” -- You see most Christmas trees are evergreen trees and evergreen trees are in a class that is uniquely their own! Evergreen trees stay forever green so long as they are planted in nutrient-rich soil with adequate sunshine and water!

So, what a contrast, they are, therefore to hardwood trees, like the deciduous oak trees, mahogany trees, and walnut trees that are just loaded full of beautiful green foliage in the summertime until the latter days of fall! It’s then that their, now “brilliantly orange, red, yellow and brightly-colored copper leaves” drop to the ground; leaving those trees completely barren until that the warmer days of spring! Then those hardwood trees are mysteriously, completely loaded with some beautiful green leaves again!

Jesus is teaching us that life in the kingdom of God shares some powerful resemblance to those evergreen trees; in that the kingdom of God, like those evergreen trees, are forever green and forever growing!

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

My friends, are you living today in the kingdom of God? If you are not living in the kingdom of God, then I am here today, as God’s spokesman, inviting you to become a resident of God’s kingdom as soon as possible!

No, it’s not an earthly kingdom, as such, but a non-geographical kingdom. On the eve of our Lord’s crucifixion, the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate said to Jesus, “So you are a king then?” And Jesus said, “Yes, I am a king, but my kingdom is not of this world! If I were an earthly king, my followers would have fought at the hour of my arrest, but my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:33-36)!

To enjoy life in the kingdom of God is to now live as people who genuinely enjoy that marvelous relationship of love and trust with our Heavenly Father than Jesus Christ has now made available to us through his dying on the cross, in payment for our sins, and in his being raised to new life again, to assure us that the Heavenly Father accepted the sacrifice he made on our behalf.

I believe that Martin Luther’s explanation of the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer, in his SMALL CATECHISM, throws some wonderful light upon this whole matter! Here, Jesus teaches us to pray: “Thy kingdom come!”

What does this mean?" Luther asks us! "The kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come among us!"

How is this done: "When God gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace, we believe that his Word is true--so that we might live godly lives here in time but also in eternity" (CPH, 1976 edition; pages 19-20)!

There are really two parables of Jesus found in our Gospel lesson today: The first is called the Parable of the Sower (Vv. 26-29) and this parable reminds us of the POWER THAT IS CONSTANTLY INHERIT AND NATURALLY RESIDING WITHIN THE WORD OF GOD, that by a way of sharp contrast may be COMPARED to the power that is inherit, or naturally residing, within a bullet. A tiny little bullet may have within it the power to kill living creatures, once that tiny little bullet is placed within its compatible firearm.

But in a much greater way, the Word of God has the power inherent within it, to awaken every one of us up out of natural state of spiritual death, to bring to us the fullest assurance of God's forgiveness of us of all our sins, empowering us now also to believe that we are God's people and in possession of the most valuable commodity ever--the forgiveness of all our sins--so that we might also have residing now within us the sure hope of eternal life!

You can plant a rubber band in the ground, but nothing will come of it!

You can plant a paper clip into the ground, but nothing will come of it!

But place a seed into the ground, and something will surely come of it!

Read the Holy Scriptures and preach the Gospel, and something most definitely will surely come of it--the kingdom of God will continue to expand its boundaries ever wider and wider.

I can remember that when my twin-sister Donna and I were about 6 years old, how we saved some chicken bones from the previous night's supper and then secretly planted them in a special spot in our backyard on the following day; believing that some time later we would go out into our yard and find some baby chickens running around out there; which never did happen!

You see, at 6 years of age, no one had ever explained anything at all to us about what used to be called the "The Birds and the Bees," or that same information, years later, as "The Facts of Life!"

And the germination and the growth of plant-life that springs forth from these sown seeds remains forever a mystery to the farmer himself: "*Who doesn't know how this takes place*" (v. 28)!

If this first little parable is about the power inherent in the Word of God, that is like the power of God inherent in a seed, the second Parable about the Mustard Seed impresses upon us how...the kingdom of God...that started out so very small; with Jesus' first 12 disciples eventually mushroomed and grew to consist of millions of people today!

Jesus' teachings here about life in the kingdom of God is highly reflective of what the Prophet Isaiah said some 600 plus years before our Savior was born! In Isaiah 55:10-11 we read: "*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth! It shall not return to be empty, but it will accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it!*"

The kingdom of God is not compared to the mustard seed as such, but to what happens to the mustard seed. Though seemingly and completely insignificant, in its tiny,

little minuscule beginning, the matured result is the provision of strength and protection for those birds of the air who come find shade and refuge in its branches!

Friends, most Bible scholars believe that Mark's Gospel was written some time before the destruction of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Mark, therefore, would have written his Gospel account sometime during the reign of Emperor Nero, who brought a grave persecution upon the Church and the followers of Jesus Christ!

Perhaps there were men and women in that early Church who were wondering, really wondering if the Church of Jesus Christ would survive and outlive that time of fierce persecution of Christians, or not!

The answer given to us in these two parables, by no one less than our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ himself, is a very clear and emphatic: "YES!" The Church would not be destroyed, but would instead continue to grow, to thrive and to flourish! On another occasion, Jesus said, *"I will build my Church at the gates of hell will not prevail against it! (Matthew 16:18)!"* *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my Word will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35)!*

Sometimes it may be helpful for us to stop and take an inventory on all the many, many ways that Jesus Christ and the Christian faith have left their marks on this world for good!

Dr. Peter Hammond is a Christian author, who in 2012 wrote a book entitled: THE DISCIPLESHIP HANDBOOK--PUTTING FEET TO YOUR FAITH!

Listen to Dr. Hammond's assessment, won't you, as to how strongly and favorably Jesus of Nazareth has influenced our world. Of Jesus, Dr. Hammond writes:

"He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30. Then for 3 years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held a public office. He never married or had a family or a home on this earth to call his own house and home!

He didn't go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled more than 200 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things that people usually believe accompany greatness. He had no academic credentials and never earned any university degrees!

He was only 33 years old when the whole tide of public opinion severely turned against him; even his closest friends deserted him! One of them denied even ever having known him at all!

He was turned over to his enemies and went through the most blatant mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his garments; the only property he had on earth.

When he died upon that cross, he was laid to rest in a borrowed grave through the pity of a wealthy friend! The New Testament is filled with testimony of people who claim that he rose from the dead three days later and ascended into heaven 40 days later (Acts 1:1-11).

Nineteen centuries have come and gone and still today he remains the most central figure in all of human history! All the armies that have marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have

not affected the lives of other people upon this earth as much as has the life of this one single, solitary Man!

History is divided into two major sections, BC: those ages that existed before the birth of Christ into this world, and AD, which is Latin for anno Domini, meaning: "In the year of our Lord;" meaning since the time of his resurrection!

The world before Christ was a world without hospitals, a world without charity, a world without respect for human life!

Hospitals were an innovation of Christianity.

The nursing profession was founded by Christians such as Florence Nightingale, because of her own great devotion to Christ.

One of history's greatest international achievements, the International Red Cross, was founded by Christians in their response to the Scriptural injunction of Jesus to care for the sick and the suffering!

The greatest invention, perhaps even paralleled somewhat by the invention of the Internet was the invention of the Printing Press, attributed to the astuteness of Johannes Gutenberg, who first used his printing press to publish Bibles.

The first universities ever to be established in Europe or America were founded by Christians; including such Ivy League schools as Harvard, Yale and Princeton in the USA and Oxford and Cambridge in Great Britain and the University of Heidelberg in Germany and the University of Basel in Switzerland.

The very word "university" comes from two Latin words that means "One Truth," and the One Truth their founders had in mind is that Jesus Christ was "The Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6).

Today is "Father's Day" in the United States of America and it is a good opportunity for many of us to be reminded, how blessed we were and how blessed so many people still are today--to have fathers--who work hard to provide for their families; also Christian fathers, who far from being perfect, were constantly ready to ask God for his forgiveness upon them for all their imperfections!

This past week I read again about a young father in Pennsylvania who was so very proud of his son in the 4th grade son, who participated in his school's first science fair.

His fourth-grade son planted some seeds in some rich potting soil in a plastic container. And wisely enough, this little fellow punched a few holes in that plastic container so that the soil could be drained free from all excess water.

But perhaps the biggest lesson that father's fourth grade son learned from that whole experience is that SEEDS DON'T GROW WHEN CHUBBY LITTLE HANDS ARE CONSTANTLY DIGGING THEM UP TO SEE HOW THEY ARE DOING!

So, we too, at times, must allow the good Lord time in our lives to make his will plain to us and show us the way that he would have us go!

There's another hymnwriter whose song comes to mind for me this day:

This is my Father's world; oh, let me not forget,

That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet!

This is my Father's world! Why should my heart be sad?

The Lord is King, let the heavens ring! God reigns let the earth be glad!"

Amen