

## FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 4:26-34

*A Farmer's Faith*

I grew up in the city. The only guy I knew with a farm was Old MacDonald. But as I've gotten to know more farmers, I've learned to appreciate what "a farmer's faith" means. A farmer doesn't expect everything in a day. He has to trust that the seed he plants and then no longer sees is growing. As a child, rain ruined my day. But rain can make a farmer's day. He understands that farming is a joint venture with God. It's no coincidence that harvest time was festival time in the Old Testament. Our own congregation was founded by farmers, who knew that time with the Lord of the harvest was time well spent away from the harvest. No matter how much technology we muster, the farmer still must trust the Lord to bring the sun up, the rain down, and a crop from a field full of dirt. All he can do is wait, hope, and pray.

So also, the work of the Church is one of sowing and then waiting, hoping, and praying. The Gospel is the power of God, not of the Church. The Church is the product of the Gospel, the silo where God's bounty is stored for His eternal feast, a lesser partner in a joint venture. Solomon says it well in the psalm I share with those who've just had a child: "*Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.*" Man can build some splendid monuments and fill some marvelous churches on his own, but without God, those monuments are ruins and those churches club houses.

While Jesus' most well known parable about farming is about the different soil on which the seed falls, this parable is about the One who brings the harvest, who works faith, which receives salvation, and sanctification, sown in the Gospel and cultivated by God. Jesus does not want a Church that thinks it has that power in itself. Jesus wants a Church that knows that power is God's. The Gospel is not a tool; it is a trust from God. We scatter it. We administer it. We preach and teach it. We don't use the Gospel to produce results. The Gospel produces results. The seed contains the potential for growth, not the farmer. The farmer merely sows.

When my kids are bored, I tell them to watch the grass grow. They inevitably tell me the grass doesn't grow. But why is there a lawnmower in the old school, then? When my parents call and ask if the kids have grown much, I often tell them, "No." But, when they come, not having seen the kids every day, they see what I didn't: they've grown like weeds. Growth is hard to see day by day. It takes time to judge real growth, growth that sustains itself, growth that really matters. After all, not all growth is good growth. Who wants to hear a doctor say that he's found a growth? The growth we want is that which God alone gives.

Are we growing? Are those we've shared the Gospel with growing? God knows. He sees what we don't. Rather than looking for growth, sometimes we are better served looking to Him who gives it. Is the seed planted in the Son, regularly watered and fed by the Harvest-bringer through confession and Absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the preached Word? If not, we don't have to dig the seed up to know there is no growth. A seed always dies without sun, water, and food. But when that seed is in the Son, when it is watered and fed, we have God's promise through Isaiah: "*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*"

While the farmer can't make the seed grow, he'd be a fool to let the rabbits eat the harvest. As Christians, we have the obligation to chase away everything that would gnaw away at the harvest. Boundaries must be set, fences put in place. The person who loves flowers must hate weeds. We must uproot the greed, the lust, the pride, the envy, and every other thorny and entangling weed that would choke out our love for God and ensnare our roots in His promises and saving gifts. But we must also remember that keeping the rabbits out and pulling weeds may protect the crop, but it will not make it grow any faster. The Gospel in Word and Sacrament is the means by which we grow. The best-protected plant will still die without nourishment.

Our sinful nature pines for quick results and visible glory. That's why people love watching the altar call during a Billy Graham crusade. It's impressive. But the camera never follows the people home, does it? The camera never shows just how often "just as I am" fades back into "just as I was before" when the music's over, when the hormones still rage, doubts still plague, and tempers still flare. With all those crusades and all those altar calls, you'd think there'd be no unbelievers left in the nation, but throw a stone and you'll still hit one. Only God can grow the seed, not through pomp or persuasion, not by decisions or dedications, but by the preached and administered Gospel. Christian's are not Chia Pets, three steps and a windowsill away from maturity. Christians are tender sprigs of a cedar, low trees grown tall only by the LORD's gracious intervention.

If the farmer digs up what he's sown early or often to see if it has grown, the crop will be lost and he will be unduly discouraged. It would be like the person who begins a diet, weighs himself every day, only loses a pound the first week, and decides diets don't work, losing hope and ending up in worst shape than before.

Christ lost more members than He gained during His ministry. In John 6, his congregation went from 5,000 members to 12. St. Paul left behind troubled congregations in most of the places he served. There wasn't much of anything mega about his churches. Nothing about the Christian Church seemed enduring. It was puny, plebian, and persecuted. But the Church is still here, having grown like a mustard seed, unexpectedly and to an amazing size. And there is no reason to doubt that the God who has granted such growth in the past will withhold it now, to doubt that the God who has rebuilt countless sinners through the Gospel will not rebuild us as well. And there is no need to try to prove it either, digging up and meddling with the seed. That can only do harm.

We are simply called to wait, hope, and pray, to trust the Gospel to do its work, because it is the power of God and nothing less than Christ's death and resurrection applied to you and at work in you. This is not an excuse for a pastor to be lazy, because the farmer sows with care, and not an excuse for the hearer to be apathetic, because the soil must receive the seed, but it is our comfort and confidence as we sow, pray, wait, and hope. Sometimes, as a coach or general manager of a sports team quickly learns, a great prospect flops, but sometimes, sometimes, something special develops in the least expected places in the least expected situations, and that is something to be rejoiced over and remembered.

I am not a farmer or the son of a farmer, but I'd wager that the waiting, hoping, and praying is almost as hard as the sowing. It's definitely less fun than a tractor ride. But worrying, complaining, and despairing has never done a farmer any good. While the fact that God alone grants growth to what we sow and harvest may seem like an inconvenience, it is really the greatest comfort. We can lie down and sleep in peace at night because what has been sown in us and what we have sown in others is in God's hands. And whose hands would you rather have it in than His? Amen.