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The Christian is Planted by the Word

In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus uses a phenomenon of nature to explain how people become his followers. Just as seeds don't plant themselves, Christians must be planted. Jesus explains that they are planted and grow with the power of God's Word. God's mighty Word is what gives life to faith. Just as in a garden, not all plants grow and faith is sometimes ruined by disinterest and disease. Jesus DEFINES A CHRISTIAN as someone who is planted and nourished by the Word.

Sermon

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

(The sermon text is quoted in full in the sermon)

Introduction – 47 years ago this past Tuesday, July 11, I was ordained into the ministry and installed as pastor of St. Paul's Church in Saginaw, MI. Next to my wedding and the birth of our sons, it was the most exciting day of my life.

The emotions I felt back in July 1976 are certainly the same emotions this year's seminary graduates are feeling this July, maybe today. You've gotten to know some of them. After years of training these men are on fire to get to work and proclaim the good news. They all believe that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. Once ordination day is over, they're ready to preach the Word.

A year won't pass before reality sets in. A few members walk away because they don't like the new preacher. The visitors who came two Sundays in a row don't come back. The inactives he visits stay inactive and the living-together couple he cautioned quit the church. Member spouses he invited never show up; neither do the new neighbors he reached out to. He starts to wonder if he's the problem or if maybe the Word wasn't as powerful as he thought it was. This is what causes burn-out in a lot of young pastors.

There are WELS members all over the country who are wondering the same thing these days. Church attendance never recovered after Covid; actually, in many churches, membership has been shrinking for years. The VBS doesn't bring in new families and neither does the soccer camp. New confirmands always did drift a little, but now they don't ever come back. And people wonder—maybe you do, too. What are we doing wrong? The gospel doesn't seem to be doing much.

Jesus felt the same frustration and he knew his followers would feel it, too. They would preach just like he did. Some people would ignore them, some would reject, some would compromise, some would persecute—that's what people did when Jesus preached. Jesus' followers would wonder like all Christians wonder: What's the point of this? Why should we do this? Jesus never wondered and he never second-guessed himself. He wanted his followers then and he wants his followers now to understand what happens when the Word is proclaimed. And this is the lesson he wanted to teach us this morning.

All We Can Do Is Plant

Jesus told a story about planting. **A farmer went out to sow his seed.** Think about this from Jesus' perspective. This farmer didn't plant each seed individually like we do in our gardens and he didn't plant with a giant planter hooked up to his tractor. He carried the seed in a basket and scattered it on the field. Nothing wrong with the farmer, nothing wrong with his planting, nothing wrong with the seed, nothing wrong with the soil. Jesus wanted to make one simple point: This is what happens when we proclaim and preach the Word.

He created four scenarios and then explained each of the four. Scenario 1: **Some of the seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.** And here's what it means: **When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.** They weren't church goers, not even on Christmas and Easter, not even when they were kids. They came to church for a wedding. The preacher preached about the love of Jesus as a model for Christian marriage; beautiful gospel sermon. But the Word never made it past their ears, it never sank in. The idea of sin made no sense to them and the news about a Savior seemed contrived. Once the echo of the sermon drifted away, the Word was gone. Jesus said, "That's what happens sometimes when we sow the seed and preach the Word."

Scenario 2: **Some seed fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.** And here's what it means: **The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.** She hadn't been to church in a while but it was Christmas Eve and she wanted to go. There was a church just down the street. She walked in and gasped. The church was darkened and the candles and lights were sparkling. The sermon was about a Savior who brought peace and good will and she felt a lot of her guilt kind of dissolve. And then people sang Silent Night. O my! It brought tears to her eyes. From that night on she never missed. But then Lent came and church seemed kind of dreary. She got tired of confessing her sins every Sunday and didn't really enjoy hearing about carrying her cross. Then one day her sister sent a frantic text message with the news that her favorite niece had cancer. The joy and excitement just drained out of her. She drifted away. The pastor called but she was done. Jesus said, "That's what happens sometimes when we sow the seed and preach the Word."

Scenario 3: **Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.** And here's what it means: **The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.** There were ten in their confirmation class; they all confessed their faith in Jesus on a happy day in May. A couple of them never showed up again; the other eight didn't expect them to stick around. One quit when his dad died suddenly and he was convinced God was unfair. A few left for college and never came home. The rest stuck it out, got married, found jobs, had kids. But work exhausted them and it was nice to have a weekend alone. Then the kids had soccer on Sunday mornings and there were block parties that started with Bloody Mary's at 11:00. They didn't hate church; they just had other things to do so they stopped going. Jesus said, "That's what happens sometimes when we sow the seed and preach the Word."

The reality of rejection has an effect on us. Why should we talk about Jesus to friends and family when it might cause hard feelings? Chances are they won't believe it anyway. Why should we reach out into our neighborhood; sharing Jesus hasn't been doing much so far. So the synod wants to start a hundred new missions in ten years. Who knows how many of those missions will still be open in twenty years? Why should I throw good money at failure? The reality of rejection is a hard pill to swallow. It leads us to doubt the worth of our witnessing. It may even lead us to wonder about the power of the Word. Maybe, just maybe, it leads us to ask

about ourselves. Are we doing this Word of God thing only because it's our habit and our tradition? Do we worship only because this is what we've always done?

Scenario 4: **Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.** And here's what it means: **The seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."**

The Word really does work. People all over the world hear it and believe it. Our sins condemn us? Yes. Jesus redeemed us? Yes. God loves us? Yes. His Word works in us, his sacraments forgive us, he hears our prayers, he comforts us in trouble, he promises life forever? Yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes. We Christians aren't all the same. Some of us struggle more with temptations than others, some show more kindness, some pray more confidently, some give more generously. But wherever there is faith in Christ, whether weak or strong, the Word has been doing its work. Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

Define Christian like this: A Christian is planted by the Word. The seed of the Word supplies the power and the plant of faith germinates and grows. This is what God says: **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.**

We cannot see into the mind of God, we cannot plumb the depths of his mysteries or guess at the working of his grace. We can't know who will reject Jesus and who will believe in him. We can't predict faith or assume unbelief. All we can do is plant. To spouses and children, to parents and family, to friends and neighbors, in Mequon and around the world, in your own way and in your own time:

Preach you the Word and plant it home
And never faint; the Harvest Lord
Who gave the sower seed to sow
Will watch and tend his planted Word.

Like my coffee cup says: Do your best and leave the rest to God. Amen.