

Automatic Growth

Mark 4:26-34

If you talk to any financial planner, it's a good bet they will talk to you about the power of compound interest. It's an investment that grows not only because of interest on the initial investment, but interest on that interest as well. You don't have to fully understand it to take advantage of it. It's growth that happens automatically.

Of course, that's a hard thing to do. It's hard to just let your money sit in an investment account seemingly doing nothing. There are always expenses to pay for. There are those needs and wants that you could use that money to buy. There's the next get rich quick scheme, an investment plan that sounds too good to be true, or the sports betting ads that fill the radio and TV now that it's legal in Iowa. Yet those things won't help you save, won't give you riches that will last.

Jesus talks in our Gospel lesson today about automatic growth, but not of investment money. He's talking about the automatic growth of a seed, and using that to explain the growth of the kingdom of God.

Looking at the first parable, it seems somewhat straightforward. The farmer plants the seeds, the seeds grow, and the harvest comes at the proper time. But once you think a little more about it, it seems strange. The farmer only plants and harvests. He doesn't seem to do anything else. The growth happens automatically. He doesn't know how. Yet the growth still happens.

Does that mean that the farmer really just needed to take some agronomy classes across the street, so he knew how the growth happens? Not quite. If you've planted a garden, you know

that you do need to do things to keep your plants growing. In weather like we've been having, you need to make sure they get enough water and don't dry out. You've needed to keep them warm or wait until after those late frosts we had to plant them. You have to try to protect them from the rabbits or other animals that try to eat them.

But at the same time, it happens without your effort. You can't make the seeds grow. You can't force the sprout to come out of the ground. You can just give them the conditions which they need to grow.

Jesus describes the kingdom of God in the same way. Now, it's important to remember that when Jesus uses the kingdom of God, he's not describing some sort of theocratic monarchy. He's not describing a physical kingdom. It's not a kingdom of this world. But it's a kingdom in this world. The kingdom of God is where God's rule is active.

And God's kingdom doesn't come the way other kingdoms or nations come into being. God's kingdom doesn't come into being through war or rebellion or conquest or exploration. God's kingdom doesn't come through politics or games of thrones. It comes through God's power alone.

For those who hear Jesus' teachings, this is confusing. We often think that Jesus teaches in parables to make his teaching more understandable, that they are earthly stories with a heavenly meaning, but it often leads to more confusion on the part of His hearers.

But when we look at this parable, we can find the interpretation fairly easily. The seed is the Word of God, as Jesus just used it in the

parable of the sower, or the parable of the four kinds of soil, earlier in Mark 4. The seed is sown when people hear God's word. As the Word takes root in someone's heart, it grows. The growth happens automatically. It happens because of God's work. God makes the seed grow. God makes the kingdom of God come. That's why Luther says in the Small Catechism, "The kingdom of God certainly comes *by itself* without our prayer, but we pray...that it may come among us also."

We don't convert people—God does that. He takes care of the growing and maturing of faith. But God uses us to scatter the seed. As Jesus says to his disciples in the Gospel of John, "For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Or as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Last week Pastor Mark preached about God's command for Sabbath rest. It seems strange that God gave a commandment to rest to the people of Israel who had been slaves in Egypt. Yet that was exactly why they needed to rest. As slaves, they couldn't rest. They weren't in control. Now, as free people, they could rest. But they could think they were in control of everything. Resting also reminded them that they were not in control, that not everything was dependent on them. Resting reminded them they were dependent on God.

The parables of Jesus show that God is at work in the world, even when his hand is hard to see. Like a tiny mustard seed or a little bit of yeast, God's kingdom starts small but grows and grows. Big things come from small beginnings. The parables of Jesus also demonstrate that

God works through simple, ordinary people and things.

What these parables tell us is that our work is to scatter the seeds of faith. It is God who makes things happen. The same God who planted the first seeds into the ground at creation, the same God who planted the seeds of faith through our parents and friends, or others, continues to make the seeds grow.

Many things in our world are automatic now. Common, repetitive tasks can be automated for more efficiency. You can have your bills paid automatically so you don't have to think about them, or remember when they are due; though you do still have to make sure you have enough money in your bank account. You can even have your church offering withdrawn automatically! Automatic things can be good because we don't have to think about them.

God's kingdom grows automatically. Christ will build his church. Nothing will get in the way of his growing kingdom. What we can do is ask so that we can be a part of it too, that God will allow us to participate in the blessings of his kingdom—the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. We are asking God to let us serve the One who saves us and share in the abundant harvest. We are asking God to help us sow the seed and gather the grain, and for God to work through us to sow the seed and gather the grain. And when God answers our prayers, he produces the growth. All we do is scatter the seed. We do know that God is in control of the growth. Plant the seeds. God will do the rest.

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June 13, 2021