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Pentecost 8

Acts 18:1-11

PLANTING AND NURTURING THE SEED

“Go and make disciples of all nations,” Christ has commissioned us. This is not an optional thing for believers. He doesn’t say, “Go if it’s convenient; go if you are into that sort of thing; go only if you feel like you know what you’re doing.” He simply says, “Go.” Go and make disciples.

To our relief, He has not left us to our own devices as to how to make disciples for Him. He has equipped us with the tools. He says, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them.” He has given us Baptism and His Word for making disciples.

Does that mean if we just set things up in the right way, package everything the right way and do everything according to a certain style or recipe that then salvation will spread and the kingdom of God will grow?

No. Not at all. Even as we endeavor to carry out Christ's Great Commission, even as we baptize, even as we teach the truths of His Word, the power does not lie within us to make disciples of Christ. Even though we rightly strive to be faithful, we are not the energizing force behind Christ's Word and Sacraments.

God's Word will produce its own results. That's the promise we heard from Isaiah 55 today: *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.*

By the power of the Holy Spirit God's Word will produce faith in Jesus in the hearts of people, will give salvation to souls and will cause the Kingdom to grow. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God's word will accomplish God's saving purposes whether we who proclaim it are strong or weak, charming or unattractive, sharp or sloppy.

Isn't that what we see in the parable Jesus taught about the Sower and the Seed? Can you imagine a farmer being so careless with his precious seed? He throws it to the wind. Only some of it falls on the field, on the good soil. Most of it seems to fall everywhere else -the path, outside the field on rocky soil. Would a farmer be so sloppy? No. But God wants us to be so careless and sloppy with His Word. Not that we should be sloppy as regards WHAT we proclaim or teach. No, we want to teach and proclaim only what God's Word says - nothing more, nothing less. But God wants us to plant the seed whenever and wherever we can as though we were being reckless with it -regardless of the results. The results are up to Him.

Now, if you plant a summer garden and neglect it the entire summer, it will be thick with weeds, so thick that it might even be hard to tell if any of the original garden plants are in there. Even so, if you start combing through those weeds you will find that some tomatoes and some carrots and some zucchini have grown. It's not the best way to grow produce, but even a neglected garden will produce something.

On the one hand, that's how God wants us so carelessly to spread His Word everywhere. His Word will produce believers.

On the other hand, let's say you plant the same garden with the same seeds and the same seedlings. Let's say you tend that garden carefully. You arrange it in rows. You regularly weed it. You water and fertilize it. You stake the tomato plants to encourage them to stand up. You tie up your green beans. You keep the bunnies out. You cannot take any credit for the fact that the plants grow and produce vegetables. God makes the plants grow and produce. But God also blesses your work of tending the garden to make it more productive.

In the same way God uses you and me not only to plant the seed of His Word in the hearts of people, but also to nurture it like a garden as it grows. In Acts 18 we are told about the apostle Paul in the city of Corinth. Except for Jesus, Paul was the greatest missionary of all time. He traveled far and wide and spread the seed of God's Word wherever he went. When he came to Corinth, he started out by preaching at the local synagogue. He met with some resistance there. Nevertheless, God told Paul in a dream: *Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am*

with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

This was a long time for Paul to stay in one place. It seems only in Ephesus did Paul stay longer. If you are familiar at all with Paul’s two letters to this congregation, 1 & 2 Corinthians, which he wrote some time later after he moved on to other mission fields, your impression of the congregation at Corinth might be a congregation fraught with messy problems. This may be not far off the mark. However, it was not for their lack of knowledge about Christ and His Word. These Christians had been thoroughly indoctrinated. That’s what’s evident as you examine the kinds of issues Paul had to address in his letters. Not the trite superstitions of neophytes to the faith but the growing pains of advanced believers. Paul had spent a long time tending and nurturing this garden. He spent his time preaching, teaching, mentoring, modeling, calling to repentance, encouraging, admonishing, coaching and training all with the Word of God. It was a productive garden to God’s glory. If there were messes, it was only because satan was not happy about how productive

Paul's work had been there and how much spiritual fruit God's Word was producing among them.

In the same way, God has put you and me in positions of tending the garden. A pastor is called not only to plant the seed, but also to tend the garden. Parents are called by God not only to plant the seed having their children baptized but also to tend the garden by teaching God's Word, disciplining and modeling the Christian life. Sunday School teachers. Bible class leaders. The Church council. All are called to tend the garden. Tending the garden is why we use a curriculum, a liturgy, an annual budget or plan an event -why we don't do things haphazard or slipshod. You may have an unchurched friend with whom you've planted the seed of the gospel and you've found that it's not a one and done conversation you have with him. You and he talk again and again and again as the Holy Spirit opens his eyes a little more each time. In this way you are called to tend the garden. The call to tend the garden is why the Lutheran elementary school and Lutheran high school have always been such a major component of the ministry of the Lutheran church.

In his 2nd letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote: *We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.* By

the power of the Holy Spirit that's what happens when we labor to make disciples for Christ.

For in our natural human minds there is only sin, confusion, anxiety, discord, blindness, aggression, aimlessness, slavery, self-service, and death.

In God's Word we have Christ -Christ who redeemed us for Himself by His death on the cross and sealed our redemption to Himself by rising from the dead. Therefore in His Word we have forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, peace, certainty, holiness, salvation, freedom and good works.

As we tend the gardens to which we've each been called, God will bless such work with His Word so that as Jesus said in His parable, it will produce fruits of faith in our lives -a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown -all to His ever-enduring glory.