

### Third Sunday after Pentecost • June 17, 2012

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

*Rev. Braun Campbell*

Mark 4:26-34 (Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10)

#### "The Unexpected Garden"

Several months ago for their service projects, a couple of Eagle Scouts took on the challenge of clearing out and improving the outdoor worship space over at the forested end of our parking lot here at St. John's. Thanks to those efforts, along with the large-scale clearing out of underbrush and dead trees that has been a part of the congregation's preparations for making use of the western side of our property, you can now go and sit on the benches by the fire pit and look across the woods. While it's only a couple of acres, that space is filled with what I'd guess to be a few dozen types of trees and shrubs and other native growth. It's really quite beautiful, especially in the afternoon as the sunlight comes in from the west and shines through the leaves of the trees. We didn't plant those trees. We didn't plan for all that ground cover to take root and grow. But they did. Nature works like that, just doing what it does automatically, and we get to go and enjoy its beauty.

A couple of weeks ago, I was talking with my dad when he told me that he was about to go and plant some herbs in his garden off of his patio. My dad and I prefer the same approach to planting herbs: buy plants and stick them in the ground. I suppose that you could go out and buy seeds, then plant them in the ground, cover the soil with plant food, and water them, waiting for the seeds to sprout and grow until you could harvest the herbs. But who's got time for that? I want my herbs sooner rather than later. Waiting a month or more for usable basil or rosemary or chives just isn't something I'm interested in. On top of that, gardens need weeding and tending, especially when you're bringing up crops from seed.

That's the problem with nature: it doesn't do what we want it to, when we want it to. Sometimes there's not enough rain for the plants. Sometimes there's too much rain. And the weeds! They grow automatically, springing up from seemingly nowhere in spots where they're not wanted. Where'd they come from, anyway? I know if I sow seed for herbs, there should be herb plants at some point. If I plant a shrub, there it is. That's the root of the problem with weeds: they just grow.

Or is it? Maybe the problem isn't the weedy plant. Weeds are plants, just like herbs and shrubs and trees. They take root and grow, nurtured by sun and soil and rain. The thing that sets them apart, though, is that they're not the plants we expect. We have different designs for our gardens, plans that do not involve using these plants where they're coming up, when they're coming up. (I wonder, did Adam and Eve have to tend to the weeds in Eden, too?) But what grows, grows; much of the time, without our influence or intent. It's like that outside of the garden, too.

You've probably heard that God's timing is not the same thing as our timing. And truth be told, you've probably heard that in those times when things aren't going according to your plans or turning out according to your expectations. You and I would probably prefer that God would act in ways and windows of time that meet our standards. Friends get sick and sometimes die. You lose your job and can't find work, possibly for months on end. Your child makes mistakes, sometimes life-altering ones, even though you can't figure out what you could have done differently along the way. There might be times when nothing makes sense – when it seems that what God allows doesn't make sense. Where's the fulfillment of His promise to keep you in His care? That's the root of the problem: God just isn't living up to our expectations.

Or is it? What has God promised, and what has He done? In our Gospel text from Mark today, Jesus is speaking to the people through parables and teaching them about how God is at work in His kingdom – His reigning – in our lives. God's rule begins in a small and unexpected way. Jesus refers his hearers to the tiny mustard seed, which was proverbially regarded as the smallest agricultural seed in Palestine. That tiny seed, once planted, can grow to be the largest of the herb plants in a garden, growing into a large shrub to a height of eight to twelve feet! Man doesn't make that happen. God is doing it, providing the necessary sunlight and the soil and the rain, growing the plant from seed to maturity – mustard and grain alike. The word that Mark uses here for the earth's action is, literally, "automatic." As we hear from Ezekiel, God is the one doing the work of bringing the seed into what it is meant to be; not in our

time, but in His. The Lord takes the small and unlikely twig from the uppermost branches in the forest and plants it on a high mountain, making it into the most majestic of trees. This pointed ahead to what God would do with His people Israel, just as it points ahead to what God would ultimately do through His Son. Indeed, this very same Jesus would be lifted up on a tree on a hill – the kingdom of God breaking into our world in a way that none of the people would have expected. God has promised us a Savior, and that’s who He has given us, even despite our expectations.

The kingdom of God is growing as God gives faith. He doesn’t always do this in ways that match our expectations and assumptions, because our expectations can often be flat-out wrong, our assumptions, flawed. And yet, God is implanting faith and nourishing hearts and minds through His Word and Sacraments all the time, even if we can’t see it taking place. This weekend, though, will be one of those times when we get to see God planting seed: in Baptism the Holy Spirit will make another soul part of His family, a planting of His own doing. It might be years – or even decades – before we human beings see the fruits of that planting in the lives of the people around us, yet the Spirit is at work to call them into life in God, nurturing and faith until it blooms. It all happens in God’s time.

Jesus points his hearers to a key thing to remember about God’s time: there brings both grace and judgment. The harvest day will come, and the crop that God has raised up will be fulfilled. And so, you and I are called to live as people of God’s planting, knowing and sharing the forgiveness that our Savior won for us. But also, as we wait and watch for that day when the Lord will ultimately fulfill His promise and bring His harvest home, opportunities will abound for us to scatter the seed of faith in the lives of the people around us. Those opportunities show God’s grace, as the Holy Spirit works – even despite our assumptions and expectations – to enlarge the harvest field. While we wait on God’s time, He calls us to experience and live in the forgiveness that He offers as He wipes our slate clean. As He would do with Ezekiel’s people in an unexpected way, the Lord is providing you with what you need to grow into the “tree” that you were meant to be, even if you can’t see it at the time. You are of God’s own planting. In patient hope, in the “automatic” working of the Holy Spirit through God’s Word and His gift of Baptism, you and I can live lives pleasing to Christ.

With Paul, we’re looking ahead to that day when Jesus brings the kingdom of God to bear in its fullness. And with Paul, we know that the garden in which we find ourselves now in this life is not the final garden. Even as we may experience suffering and uncertainty from day to day, you and I can look ahead to that which awaits us, as the apostle wrote to the church in Corinth. The things of this world will pass away, but we know that beyond the harvest there is a garden that will not pass away, that will not crumble and fall in time.

As our nation is celebrating Father’s Day this weekend, here’s a special word of encouragement to you who are fathers or who have served in a fatherly role in someone’s life. God has entrusted you with a sacred responsibility in your child. You are to nurture the seed of faith in your child’s life, setting an example for a life that is rooted in God’s mercy and grace, a life that is pleasing to Christ. God is at work for them through you.

We live in a sure and certain hope as God’s people. Even though we cannot and do not always see God’s ongoing work in our lives or in the lives of the people around us, that doesn’t mean that God is failing us; rather, He is exceeding any expectation that you or I could ever have. You see, you are His planting, **you are the unexpected garden**. Despite your faults and failings, despite your wrong expectations and flawed assumptions, the kingdom of God has broken ground in your life through Jesus. Each and every one of us in the community of faith that is Jesus’ Church can grow and bloom in lives that are pleasing to Christ, even though no one might have seen it coming. God’s timing is not the same as our timing, after all. The seed of faith grows – even despite our best effort.

**Amen.**