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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
16 June 2024

Sermon on Colossians 1:3-8

Worship Theme:

From the Tiniest Seed Grows the Largest Kingdom

Earthly kingdoms advance through military might, political force, and worldly wealth. But that's not how it works in the kingdom of God. God's kingdom advances in ways that are imperceptible. Through something that seems insignificant to most—the gospel—the King of kings establishes his reign in human hearts. Jesus himself compared the gospel to a tiny seed. Yet within a seed is hidden life. As the seed of the gospel is planted, the largest of all kingdoms grows.

Sermon Theme: “Watch it Grow!”

1. Living Seed Planted
2. Living Faith Produces

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our risen and ascended Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

Have you ever watched a plant grow? Not just checked in on it every couple days or so, but actually physically sat there and stared at it to watch it get bigger? It sounds excruciating! We might as well watch paint dry because it would be faster! Sitting down to watch a plant grow sounds so boring because on the outside it seems like nothing is happening! We don't see water or nutrients moving around, we don't see stems getting longer, we don't see fruits or vegetables immediately appearing. But even if we can't see the day-to-day details coming together, the end result of a plant's growth is a delightful product to behold and enjoy.

Today you and I get to spend a little time with the Apostle Paul and his letter to the people living in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor. In his opening words Paul is rejoicing, and says: *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you!* Right away we see the heart of a pastor loving the people he serves – Paul prays for the Colossians. And when he does, he praises and thanks God for them and for the privilege and opportunity to **Watch Them Grow!**

In our Bible Studies and sermons, we often say our faith is like a plant. That's not just a clever idea your pastors came up with one day – it's a very Scriptural image! Paul himself talks this way. But before we talk about faith itself, we need to back up and see where faith begins. Many people misunderstand what faith is, what it does, and where it comes from.

So what is faith and what it is not? It's not something we are born with or have always had, nor can we dig down deep inside ourselves and find it. It's not something we can cause to grow or become stronger with our own strength or abilities. And sadly, it's not necessarily something that, once we have it, we're guaranteed to have it forever; faith must be cared for so we don't lose it!

Even though we were not born with faith, we do have it now because it was given to us as a gift. Even though we can't feed our faith with our own power and strength, God is more than able to feed our faith, and frequently does! He creates faith, strengthens faith, and causes faith to grow through "the Means of Grace" (the gospel in Word and sacrament). This is the only way God has promised to feed our faith, which is why pastors and teachers and family members and friends spend so much time checking in on the people we love and care about to make sure "they" (we! you!) are regularly spending time in God's Word, both at home and at church. We must understand how important it is for our faith to be fed this way!

To help us understand this importance, Paul takes the Colossians and us back to the start of our faith: *The faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you.* In his letter to the Romans, Paul said it this way: *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.* [Ro. 10:17] Clearly, faith is critically important for us to have, and thankfully, God has shown us exactly how we get it – from hearing the true message of the gospel about Christ!

That message never finds its power in the person speaking it, nor in the person hearing it for that matter; if the power of this message relied on people like us, it would surely have no power at all. But this message relies solely on the power of the Living One who first spoke it and gave it for all humanity to hear, and this message does a lot! The Word of God is alive and active because the God who speaks it is alive and active. We can't go around and find random words spoken by any random person, start reading them, and grow in saving faith. If our faith is truly in Jesus, and if we want it to grow and become stronger, the only way that's possible is by hearing the words of Jesus himself – the same words that planted our faith in the first place!

For the Word of God is **Living Seed**. In Mark 4, Jesus describes the entire Kingdom of God as something living and growing. Just like any plant, the seed must come first. God in his grace uses people just like you and me to spread the **Living Seed** and to **Plant** it in our neighborhoods and communities and all around the world. I and several hundred other pastors, teachers, and church members spent a couple days this past week at our South-Eastern Wisconsin District Convention. While there, we were reminded that true outreach and evangelism doesn't come from having all the right programs at our church and school; it comes from each one of us simply sharing the gospel with the people God has put into our spheres of influence in life. Paul reminded the Colossians of that truth when he talked about "*the true message of the gospel that has come to you.*" The Gospel is the **Living Seed Planted** in the hearts of everyone who has faith in Jesus the Savior.

And that Gospel has a tremendous effect!! Paul exclaims, *In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.* Paul was so excited to **Watch It Grow!** The **Living Seed** of the Gospel of Jesus was bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world. Many of you

probably love to garden, and if you're anything like the other gardeners I know, your garden has probably expanded a lot over the years. A few more plants here, and a couple more flowers there, and the great growth experiment in your yard increases. Some plants don't like to stay in the spot they were planted though. Their root systems get established and they end up spreading all over the place!

Paul says that's exactly what the Gospel does too! Look around you and you'll see it – the **Living Seed** continues to be planted and bear fruit all around the world. As it does, the **Living Seed Planted** in people's hearts becomes **Living Faith**. Jesus died to save us and forgive us. Jesus lives to prove that his victory is real and we will live forever as a result of it. **Living Faith** fills our hearts with joy and peace at that great news! *Just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard the gospel and truly understood God's grace.* (Col. 1:6)

One of the challenges we face when sharing Jesus with other people is when they don't take the time to actually listen to us. It's frustrating because the message of the gospel is so simple: we want them to know it's all about God's grace! God is filled with love for people – a love we can't deserve in any way, yet a love that caused him to do the unthinkable, sending his Son to die in our place to forgive our sins and to give us perfect life in heaven forever.

When you hear those words and find yourself nodding in belief, agreement, and joy, that's your **Living Faith** at work, a faith rooted in your heart, growing stronger as it feasts on the nourishment it finds in God's Living Word. But once the **Living Seed is Planted** and springs up into **Living Faith**, then what?

I tend to divide plants into two categories: plants with a purpose, and plants with no purpose whatsoever. Plants with no purpose whatsoever irritate us, take up space in our garden or yard, and do absolutely nothing productive for us. Plants with a purpose, however, are lovely to see, and they benefit us and provide for us.

So which of those two categories describes your faith in Jesus? Is your faith like a plant without a purpose in your life? Do you only care for it when you have time or on the rare occasion when you actually feel like showing up for church or having devoted time with God? Do we have the mindset that as long as our faith plant isn't completely dead, then we're good? If so, we need to look again at what faith is. **Living Faith** doesn't sit around doing nothing. **Living Faith Produces!** In the book of James, we find these strong words about faith: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead.* (Ja. 2:14,17)

The Book of James can be a tough one sometimes, but these verses from are clear. Notice they don't say anything about our works and deeds saving us. We are NEVER saved by what WE do. We are ONLY saved through faith in Jesus Christ and what HE did, and even that faith is a free gift to us from God! But useful plants naturally produce fruits or vegetables or flowers. The same is true for faith. **Living Faith Produces.**

What does it produce? Deeds of kindness and love for people around us. It clings for dear life to every word of Jesus, knowing that only he can sustain, feed, and strengthen faith, helping it to grow. Faith takes the love God has so generously

poured into us and shares it with the world. A crop of faith-fruits of love for our neighbor is a beautiful thing to witness and see.

Paul was thrilled when news of such wonderful acts of love reached him: *We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people.* The fruits of **Living Faith** are delightful! Since we're not told the specific faith-fruits the Colossian believers were displaying, evidently God decided we don't need to know. After all, fruits of faith often look different. The acts of love my faith produces in my life might not look the same as the acts of love your faith produces in your life – and that's just fine! But faith and love are inseparable. In love, God gives us faith. In faith, we spread God's love. Whatever **Living Faith Produces** is naturally filled with godly love for others.

If Paul had written this letter to us instead of the Colossians, what would he say? Do we have an obviously-**Living Faith** generously producing fruits of love all over the place? Or is ours a faith that rarely produces fruit? Either way, whether our faith is flourishing or floundering, today is a perfect reminder to keep our focus firmly on Jesus. Faith is only as great as its object. In other words, our faith isn't great because of how great or strong we are or because we produce such beautiful fruits. No, our faith is strong and great only when it drinks deeply from the nourishing Word of our Savior.

He is the reason we can *always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* When our faith is weak, Jesus is there. When our faith is strong, Jesus is there. When questions arise and our faith wavers, Jesus is there. When our faith has never been stronger and we're telling everyone we meet about our Savior from sin, Jesus is there. When our faith isn't producing fruits as much as we would like, we go to our Savior. And when forgiveness and strength and life are given to us again as the burden of guilt and shame is lifted from our shoulders, clearly Jesus is there. The nourishment we find in God's Word never runs out – he holds out his gracious hands to us constantly, inviting us to come and feast again and again and again.

I don't plan on spending pretty much any of my summer watching plants grow. But it is fun checking every so often to be delighted by how much they have grown and how many fruits and vegetables have been produced since the last time I looked. You and I have something far more exciting to watch though. We get to watch the **Living Seed** of God's Holy Word get **Planted** again and again as the good news of Jesus is spoken and shared, resulting in tremendous growth of faith and expansion of the Kingdom of God! As we are daily fed and refreshed by that same **Living Seed**, the **Living Faith** God has given us naturally **Produces** fruits of kindness and care for the people around us, showing them the love of Jesus that never runs out. It may take a while sometimes to see visible progress or growth, but the end results of this work of God are breathtaking and magnificent (thrilling to see!) as the **Living Seed** becomes **Living Faith** and together they grow and bear fruit all around the world. "Thank you, Lord, for the gift of faith and love you have given to us in Jesus and for the privilege to **Watch It Grow!**" Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.