

Last month I was on my way to a church planting seminar across the state. As I was going about my work, a different kind of planting was going on. Grandma and grandpa had come to visit our house and they were helping my kids plant flowers and vegetables for the spring. They had to pull weeds, dig holes, and pluck out stones. Planting is a lot of work, and now we're excited to see the fruit of their labor.

Jesus teaches us, “**The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.**” Nobody likes talking about the statistics of new congregation starts. A back of the envelope calculation says 3 out of 4 fail within the first six years. But we can apply the same thing to our spiritual life. We plant seeds with hope. We take our kid to church not knowing if he'll abandon the faith by college. We stop by our brother's house to drop off a Portals of Prayer not knowing whether he'll read it or throw it into the recycling bin. We schedule church services and we don't know whether anyone will show up or if we'll be packed to the gills.

There's a lot of overlap between gardening and God's kingdom. Perhaps it's no surprise that we get this imagery from our Lord in this text and ones like it. It's a lot of work. It's not going to happen overnight. Things could go wrong. But just like farmers and gardeners, we have faith to see that a harvest will come in the fall. We stick to the basic strategy, and we leave the rest in God's hands. In summary, 4. Planting is an act of hope.

Our text continues, “**He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.**” Now there's not much at stake in my small backyard garden, but farming can be stressful. What kind of insurance do you invest in this season? How heavily do you invest in futures to hedge your bets? When it's planting or harvest, you're working around the clock. So much is out of your control.

The ministry can be similar. There never seems to be enough time. The sermons you pour your life into fall flat and the ones you cobble together at the last minute change lives. Congregations wring their hands about budgets, and the latest statistics tells us that in 2019 4,000 Protestant Churches closed while only 1,000 new ones opened. Just in April a local LCMS church not far from here closed. Who's to say we won't be next?

In less than a month we will welcome a vicar who in part will be helping to lay groundwork to plant a church in Viroqua. We don't exactly know what the year will look like with that. There can be some anxiety with not knowing. I pray that we as a congregation can stand behind this effort and see this as our church plant and not his or the district.

But even on a local day to day level, we never know how someone will receive the message of God's Word. We fear rejection. We fear apathy. We fear a lack of results after hours of hard work. Yes, 3. Planting can be anxious business.

Jesus continues **“The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.”** We all know how it goes. By July or August your friend calls you up saying, “Do you want any cucumbers? I have them coming out of my ears!” At a church in our region, one parishioner set up a table in the narthex as a garden surplus exchange where you could donate your excess garden produce and trade it for someone else’s excess.

I think we can’t avoid the fact that there are cultural forces that simply make it less desirable to be a Christian than in the 50s. In the 1950s, the LCMS was planting three churches a week. Can you believe that? When I hear that, I assume I must have misheard.

But the Bible gives us encouragement. **“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”** In our church planting seminar, the facilitator pushed back against the idea of new churches being called mission churches. Yes, there are new congregations started, but every congregation is a mission church. We exist to share Christ’s love with those in La Crosse, the Coulee Region, and ultimately the whole world.

For all our anxiety over results, we sometimes remain intentionally ignorant of the causes of growth. The Holy Spirit uses God’s Word and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper to create and sustain faith when and where He wills. It’s as simple as that, and if the seeds don’t grow, it’s not because God’s Word failed.

I know all of us have those friends who may be on the fence about becoming a Christian or growing in their faith. Consider inviting that friend out for coffee, even, invite them out for a beer. Choose a Gospel, and just meet and read a Gospel together and discuss it. Do it once a week or twice a month. You don’t need a lesson plan. You don’t need an agenda. Bring someone to God’s Word and let the Holy Spirit do the work. Just like in gardening, we plant the seeds and water, and God does the rest. Our third point, 2. The Lord uses planting seeds to grow His Kingdom.

On this Father’s Day, we give thanks for the earthly Fathers our Heavenly Father has provided us. In one T.V. show a father is a professional soccer coach. The son remarks to the father, “Dad, when I see you coach soccer on TV it doesn't look like you're doing anything.” To which the father replies: “Well, it's cause I'm not, all right. It ain't like being a football coach back home, kiddo. I got a lot less control, 'cause once the game gets going, I can't tell me fellas what to do. So I just gotta hope that everything I've been trying to teach 'em made some sort of impact on 'em and that they'll make the right decisions when they're out there on their own. You know, it's kind of like being a dad I guess, huh?”

There are a lot of parallels between planting and being a father. A dad can water, pluck weeds, but there is a lot of hoping and praying as the dad lets their children make their own choices.

Our fathers have worked hard to teach us the right thing to do, and for many of us, they are no longer there to show us how to live. Nonetheless, we know the impact they made on our lives, and we hope that the fathers in our church and society can continue to make a positive impact to teach their children, and most especially teach them the truths of God's Word. We read in Proverbs **“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”**

Returning to the Gospel text, **“But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”** Pasta sauce and berries are just getting too darn expensive, so that's why we're growing tomatoes, strawberries, and raspberries in our garden. Why are you a Christian?

Part of it is knowing where you go when you'll die, you get to go to heaven. But more than that, knowing the Lord Jesus who lived a perfect life for you, who died to forgive all your sins, and rose again to prove to me and to you that death no longer has power over us, it changes lives.

Following Christ isn't a matter of just having your membership on the rolls of the right organization, it's about lives changes for the better here and now even as we look ahead to the life to come. For much of his adult life, Clive was an atheist who served in academia. At age 32, Clive re-committed his life to Christ reaffirming the baptism and faith that he was baptized into as an infant.

Although he would only live another 32 years before dying at age 64 of kidney failure, he would make an impact for God's Kingdom that would go well beyond his earthly lifespan.

This conversion wasn't as simple as turning on a light switch, but it was from the influence of Christian friends and Christian authors who finally brought Clive to this life change.

You probably have been influenced by the work of Clive. This man I'm talking about is more commonly known as C.S. Lewis, author of many Christian books and most notably the Chronicles of Narnia. A children's fantasy series that has Christian themes. In short, this work of sharing God's Word isn't about nickels and noses, it's about the souls of friends, neighbors, and relatives. It's about the world in which we live. 1. A Growing kingdom is ready for the harvest.

As any farmer knows, planting can be a lot of work and it can contain many unknowns, but the only thing crazier than planting a field of corn is not planting one because you're afraid nothing will grow. REJOICE CHRISTIAN FRIEND BECAUSE THE LORD USES YOUR WORK TO GROW HIS KINGDOM.