

It is mid June and I believe it is the wettest June since I moved here. So as a direct result of all of the rain, we tend to have all kinds of green outside. I don't believe I have seen anyone watering their grass lately and it is all a nice green. The veggie gardens are growing like crazy. Fruit trees are bearing fruit. The grape vines at the parsonage are also growing and starting to develop grapes. Rain tends to do that with seeds, plants and trees.

We are in a time of growing as we work the ground and tend to our gardens. All of the work that we put in helps everything to grow as we wait to pick the produce that grows. We are in a season of green.

The outside world is not the only season of green that we have. Look around in here. The paraments on the altar, pulpit and lectern are also green. We are in the season of Pentecost which continues to the end of November when we have Advent. The colors will change for Reformation and All Saints Sunday, but other than that, they will remain green.

Green is more than just a color because the green also represents growth in Christian faith. It represents growth in the life of discipleship as individuals and as the church. The readings during this season will help that growth because they will focus on the life as Jesus' disciples and life in God's kingdom.

Today's lesson is a good example and it is very appropriate because it is a teaching in the form of a parable about growth.

Today I want to ask you this question: "How Does Your Garden Grow?" In other words, how does your life as a disciple of Jesus grow? How does our life together as Christ's church grow? How does your garden grow?

But there's where we need to clear things up right away! It's not "your" garden! It's not even "our" garden. It's God's garden! The garden and the growth and the greening up belong to God! He planted this garden, the kingdom of God, and he's the one who makes it grow.

The growth is not up to us, either in our individual life as Christians or in our life together as church. God will make his garden grow. Now it will happen among us, but we don't create the growth. Only God can make a tree, and only God can make a garden grow.

This is what Jesus is teaching us in his parable about the mysterious growing power of the seed. He says: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

The point that Jesus is making here is that the power to produce a crop is packed into the seed itself. The person who sows the seed doesn't "do" anything, really. They can sit back and relax because the growing power is all packed into that little tiny seed.

Sometimes we think it's up to us. "I just need to try harder to be a better Christian, by having enough will and effort." "I'm really gonna try hard this time, I know it!" And then we fail and fall backward. We need the word, God's word of forgiveness in Christ and of new life in the Spirit, in order to grow the garden that is our Christian life. How does your garden grow? By God's word being planted in the soil of your soul, day after day, week after week, year after year.

Here you are again waiting for that seed to be planted so that God can cause it to grow. That seed is Christ Jesus, God's only son. He came down from heaven, to live and die for you, when you had no life in yourself. He did it all for you, fulfilling the law you broke, dying on the cross for all your sins, paying the full price that sets you free. He was planted in the ground, buried, like a seed that was sown, that out of his death would come life everlasting for all of us.

This is the good news, the seed that produces the kingdom of God in our midst. All the power, the life-giving, growing power, comes from God and is packed into the seed that is the gospel. New life, eternal life, life in the Spirit, a life of faith in God and love for others; everything you need is packed into this seed.

But what is this life-giving seed like for the church? Church growth is a popular term these last couple of decades and people mistakenly think that church growth is up to us, that we've got to grow the church by means of human techniques.

By the power of the pastor's personality, her leadership style, his blow-dried hair or her pearly white teeth. By the preacher's funny stories and how-to messages, such as the "Ten Steps to a Happier You!" By peppy music that sounds more like you're in a disco than in the house of God. By a plethora of programs that meet people's felt needs, which may not be their real needs. People think that our human techniques is how you grow the church.

The only problem with this is that God's garden only grows one way and that is through the Word. The Word rightly preached and taught and sacramented. That is God's method of church growth, whether in quantity or in quality. Preach the word, truly and faithfully. Let your practice, reflect and reinforce your doctrine, your belief in God.

The seed is the Word, God's Word. It will produce the growth, in us and in the church. The growth in you may be gradual, hard to notice from day to day. It may seem like two steps forward, one step back. Thank God, the gospel Word is a word of forgiveness,

because that is just what we need as faltering, often-failing disciples. I know that's what I need.

Likewise with the church. We try to take the growth of the church into our own hands, and we mess it up, time after time. We become frustrated when we see small numbers, and we look for somebody to blame. But today Jesus is reassuring us that this is his church, the kingdom of God is growing, and it is growing his way through the faithful proclamation and teaching of God's Word and His sacraments for us.

This is the long season of green that we're walking in, starting today. It's not always easy being green because there are growing pains along the way. But it is June, and everything is green. And God is growing his garden among us.