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

Our text is the Holy Gospel appointed for this 4th Sunday after Pentecost. Hear again this brief parable from our Lord: With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade—thus far the Word of our Lord.

The kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, is like the mustard seed. It started out as small as you could imagine — it consisted of the Lord Jesus and his twelve disciples. But it has grown to the ends of the earth — to every continent of the globe. It has sprouted from the smallest of seeds to the largest of the garden plants.

In making this comparison for us in the parable, Jesus tells us quite a lot about God’s kingdom. We hear of the humble beginnings of the kingdom and the remarkable growth that it has on this earth. But which kingdom is he talking about? Having the wrong kingdom in mind has lead to a wrong understanding of not only the kingdom, but also a wrong understanding of its King: Christ the Lord. You see, like the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking, you and I want to hear of a more worldly kingdom. We want to hear of a majestic realm that grows and conquers, fearing no enemies. We would most certainly think in such wise about the kingdom where God himself is the King! Jesus’ hearers no doubt thought of the kingdoms of David and Solomon, and many of them wished for a return to the glorious kingdoms of old — the theocracies that centered in the temple of Jerusalem, where God’s Name was present among them. But Jesus is not speaking here of a kingdom of might that governs men, nor is he talking about the kingdom of heaven — rather, he is talking about the kingdom of God as it grows on earth—a kingdom of faith that is his church.

This kingdom starts out like the tiny mustard seed that is sown, but could be carried to and fro by the slightest breeze like chaff. Any other kingdom beginning as fragile as this would have been snuffed out, and many have been. The kingdom began under the most humble of circumstances, yet it grew into the greatest of all kingdoms. For Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, came down from heaven and was born not in a palace in Jerusalem. He did not take upon himself human flesh in great splendor and majesty. No, he was born in the tiny town of Bethlehem, to a lowly virgin named Mary, the betrothed of a simple carpenter. Who would have thought that this insignificant mustard seed of a king with his tiny band of disciples would be hailed as king of heaven and earth by people from all nations, thousands of years after he walked the earth?! And yet Jesus, true God and true Man, begotten of the Father in eternity, has such a kingdom—a kingdom that will remain until the last day; against which the gates of hell shall never prevail.
But even knowing which kingdom Jesus speaks of does not keep our sinful hearts from seeking to add or take away from the Word of the Lord. I would direct your attention at this time to the first parable from this morning’s Gospel text—a parable that provides vital context for the parable of the mustard seed: The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself…

The seed of the Gospel is sown to the ends of the earth and it grows. And it grows without the work or achievement of men. But wait a minute! What about the great commission? Isn’t it our responsibility to convert the nations — to bring people to faith — to save the lost? Well, it certainly is our responsibility to teach all nations to observe all things that Jesus commanded, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. But that is all. We, the church, are to baptize and to teach. That alone is our task. For it is God who brings the sinful heart to repentance. As much as you and I, dear friends, would like to know that it is our efforts that further the kingdom of God, Jesus himself says otherwise right here in Mark chapter 4. The sower scatters the seed and observes its growth, but he has nothing to do with the sprouting of the seed and he cannot make the plant grow. And just as this man is powerless to cause growth, so also are we absolutely powerless to create faith in others and grow the church. Do not be deceived into thinking that the kingdom of heaven will be filled with souls as a result of your work, or that hell will be populated due to the lack thereof. We have the power only to proclaim the Word that has already been given to us. We preach Christ and him crucified — we proclaim the Good News, but we cannot create saving faith any more than a dead man can resurrect himself. As the old saying goes, you can lead the horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. St. Paul knew this to be true, for in speaking of those who had been converted on his missionary journeys, he said, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.”

God’s Word teaches clearly, and our Lutheran Confessions affirm, that the Holy Spirit converts the soul and creates saving faith when and where it pleases him. The growth of the kingdom is his work and his work alone. It is God who works through the preached word, for faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. It is God, not man, who has worked through the most simple and humble elements of water, bread, and wine to create and sustain faith in those who are in his gracious presence. It is God who has worked this faith in little Addy here this morning, through the washing of water and the word in her baptism. She has become a branch grafted to her Savior Jesus, who is the true vine. The kingdom of God has been grown this day before your very eyes. The seed of the Gospel has been sown in this child and God has granted growth to his church. And he has done this himself through the means he has designated; he has done it without our help, and he most certainly doesn’t need it. He alone has joined Addy to the kingdom, the mustard tree. We marvel at the wonders of God’s mercy and his salvation. We marvel at the knowledge that he has taken us, who would otherwise be lost and condemned creatures, and joined us to him in his kingdom. And we marvel at his mercy, for not only does grow his kingdom independent of our actions, he often prospers it despite our actions. As the prophet Ezekiel proclaimed, the LORD brings low the high tree, and elevates the low tree. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.

Our command from the Lord is not grow my kingdom, but rather feed my sheep. It is our task as Christians to faithfully proclaim God’s Word to all people — to feed them with the life giving Word. But we must also remember that it is the Word that gives life and not ourselves. We still live in the kingdom of the church on earth; we remain the Church Militant. And in this kingdom, where God’s
grace comes through means — through Word and Sacrament — sinful man still has the power to resist the love and mercy of the Creator. And even those who are of the flock of Jesus the Good Shepherd live a life of struggle against the devil, the sinful flesh, and the fallen world around them. You and I sin in every hour of every day. Our lives, even though God expects them to be exemplary to the world, are still lived in a constant cycle of repentance and forgiveness. Add this to the fact that man’s nature is overtly hostile to God, and that not even Jesus converted everyone he preached to, and it will be no wonder that mankind is at enmity against God — hardened against his Maker. Thus, we are not to expect immediate results and growth in numbers wherever we bring the Word. This is not to say that God’s Word returns to him empty. The Word of God is powerful and able to change the hearts of sinners, leading them to repentance and faith. But as laborers in his harvest, you may be comforted, dear Christians, that you may trust in God and his promises and not in your own efforts. Remember, the Lord works through means that can still be resisted, and you will encounter people who reject the Gospel and are hardened against the Lord Jesus. Does this mean that missionary efforts are a failure when we don’t have impressive numbers to report? Does this mean that unless a congregation grows by a certain percentage that it is to be classified as a dead or dying church? By no means! Scripture tells us that the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents. The angels in heaven rejoice this day over little Addy, whom God has brought to faith and brought into his kingdom.

But considering as an example our own congregation, the number of souls on our roster was reduced by two in the month of June. Now there are those who would look at that statistic and insist that we are a dying church. Well I’m here to tell you that not only is that an unbiblical and unloving comment, it is also an insult and an offense to the Lord of the church. These two departed souls are now in heaven! They have received and now wear the crown of life. They were baptized Christians who have left the Church militant and now enjoy everlasting bliss in the Church Triumphant. How could their eternal salvation be considered a failure? The church, the kingdom of God on earth, exists solely for this purpose — to feed the sheep, keeping them properly nourished with the Word and Sacraments so that when it pleases God to take them from this vale of tears, they are transferred from death to eternal life. If anything, saints called to eternal rest are for the church the greatest possible success! When the books are opened on the final day, it will not be the bottom line or statistical totals that are examined, but the names of the blessed that are written in the Book of Life.

When I, your pastor and teacher, stand before my Judge, knowing that I face a more strict judgment, the Lord will say to me, Well done, thou good and faithful servant, not on account of how many souls I brought to him, but on account of my faithful shepherding of those souls. And for a young man preparing his first sermon as pastor of his congregation, such reflection on the final judgment struck fear in my heart. But it also brought me great joy. It is an honor and a privilege like no other to be before you, even as the lowly mouthpiece for the Lord that I am. It will indeed be my task to proclaim the Word of our Lord from this pulpit, and the Word of God will do his work in you, the hearers in his flock. And if I do my job faithfully, there will be times that the Word will be sharp and pungent like mustard. For the letter, that is, the Law, kills, but the Spirit gives life. It will be my task to convict you of your sin through the Law, and to bring you the healing balm of Gilead through the Gospel.

God has brought each one you here this morning because you are joined to the branches of the mustard tree of the kingdom. He draws you to himself and he creates in you the desire to be fed with his gifts. And Scripture declares that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This morning you have confessed your sins to God,
and you have received absolution — God remembers those sins no more. As the baptized, you have put on Christ — you have been wrapped in the white robes of his righteousness, as little Addy was before your eyes at the beginning of the Divine Service. And as if this precious gift of forgiveness were not enough, he also bids you to his table this day, to receive the very body and blood given and shed for you on the cross. Come, and have your faith strengthened and express your unity with one another as the communion of saints in the kingdom of God. For there also you receive the forgiveness of all of your sins. The LORD has spoken, and he will do it. In the + Name of Jesus, Amen.