

SERMON TEXT FOR PROPER 6B

PREACHED June 17, 2018 at ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXT: Mark 4.26-34

He's been called, "The man who saved a billion lives." Who is he? His name is Dr. Norman Borlaug, and allow me to explain just exactly how he received this moniker.

Borlaug graduated with degrees in plant pathology and genetics (so I guess you could say he was a plant doctor), and went directly to Mexico where eventually he developed short-stemmed, high-yield, disease-resistant varieties of wheat. Those varieties helped Mexico turn its agriculture around so that, by 1963, Mexico became an exporter of wheat.

In 1965, Dr. Borlaug shipped the first of his new wheat seed varieties to the Indian subcontinent, making possible the feeding of a billion people in India and Pakistan. So thanks to Borlaug's seeds - and in spite of its massive population - today India is self-sufficient in food production.

Borlaug also developed new rice plants, introducing varieties that improved those crops in countries that rely on that staple to feed their populations.

In recognition of his contributions to world peace through increasing food supply, Borlaug received the Nobel Peace prize in 1970. The Nobel committee chair explained, "More than any other single person of this age, [Borlaug] has helped to provide bread for a hungry world. We have made this choice in the hope that providing bread will also give the world peace."

Borlaug died in 2009 at the age of 95, but, almost to the end, he worked to keep hunger at bay, serving as a consultant to the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico, and as president of a foundation seeking to spread the Green Revolution to sub-Saharan Africa.

It's not a big jump, then, for us to go from Borlaug's work in seeds and plants to our gospel text where Jesus compares the kingdom of God to seed scattered on the ground which then sprouts and grows, and, when fully ripe, is harvested.

It is interesting to note that no other Gospel includes this first parable - probably because it's boring. There are no surprises; everything proceeds according to plan. Jesus simply speaks about seeds and what they are supposed to do. They grow and produce without help even from the farmer.

And now the all-important question: what does this parable mean? Of course, there's always more than one answer to that question, but here is one. The reign of God will take root, but Jesus does not specify how or where or to whom. It will grow gradually and automatically - perhaps so subtly that you won't even notice, until at last it produces its intended fruit. Like I said: boring.

But this conclusion does remind us that the crop will not fail! And as followers of Jesus today, we need to hear this message. We live at a time when, in many places, churches are not prospering, and we find ourselves pessimistic about its future. *Is the crop going to fail? Are the seeds of faith we've spread actually growing or not?* Jesus reminds us that God alone is responsible for the harvest, which tells us that the gospel

seeds we scatter are growing, even if *"we do not know how,"* and that the full grain will one day appear.

But then we get a second parable, the more famous parable of the mustard seed. In this parable, the yield from the scattered seed will be significant. So with this sowing and planting, there are no worries about the harvest. We can sow the seed with confidence, anticipation and joy. The growth is happening, the harvest will come. If we do our job, we need not worry about whether God will do God's job.

But there's something a bit more ominous about the growth of this mustard plant. As contemporary theologian John Dominic Crossan puts it: *"The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [more] like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses -- if you could control it."* (*The Historical Jesus*, pp. 278-279).

So Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. If it were sold in a box, it would likely have a warning – *"use only in moderation"* - or perhaps even *"may be hazardous to your health."* But that's just it. The kingdom isn't a commodity to be bought and sold, used diligently but carefully. It's invasive, hearty, tenacious, resilient, and hard to kill off. Even death on a cross did not kill off Jesus' ministry. And I think that's the point: this kingdom that Jesus proclaims isn't something we can control. And it's definitely not safe. Rather, the kingdom of God – God's reign on earth - is a word of promise that creates hope and expectation for a new and better world. It is also dangerous, because you just don't know where it will take you or what you will do when it seizes hold of you.

As Jesus teaches us in these parables, God causes the kingdom to grow, and that kingdom will not stop growing until it covers the world. We are called to be participants in the sowing of seed, and let God do the rest. As our psalmist reminds us today, *"Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of God; they shall bear fruit in old age; they shall be green and succulent; that they may show how upright the Lord is, my rock in whom there is no injustice."* AMEN