

Mark 4:26-29

The odds of a baby sea turtle surviving into adulthood are not very good. After hatching out of its egg, it must avoid scads of predator birds as it makes its way from the nesting site down to the water. These birds seem to know when hatching time has arrived, and they swarm over the beach picking off one turtle after another. The few babies who do make it down to the sea then have another crisis to face, for the waters, and not just the skies, are teeming with predators--fish and other hungry sea creatures who devour the baby turtles as quickly as possible. With so many obstacles to overcome, it's a wonder that any baby sea turtles survive at all. Indeed, only one or two out of a hundred in a nest ever become adults.

Today I'm looking at the survivors; the one or two out of a hundred. Not sea turtles, but Christians in the Kingdom of God. Earlier in Mark 4 we hear of the sower and the seed and the four types of soil. As the seed is scattered on the ground, most of it falls in places where it will not grow; or where Satan swoops down to devour the Word of God out of an immature Christian's heart like birds devour baby turtles; or it falls among thorns which grow up with the seed of the Word and choke the young plant before it can reach maturity. But some of the seed falls on good soil, and despite the driving rains, and scorching heat, and days and weeks with no rain, the seed grows and develops into maturity--and of this you are living proof.

Now the odds of someone like you developing into a mature member of God's Kingdom are not very good. Predators abound. The devil is constantly vigilant, looking for devious ways to devour us. The temptations in the world to lure us away from Christ are overwhelming to developing Christians. The weakness of our own flesh is a daily struggle and obstacle for us. By all rights you should not be here today. Why would you take a few hours out of your weekend to come to church when you have so much to do at home? Why would you open your ears to listen to the preached Word when there is so much else on your mind? Why would you be drawn to this assembly today when some of us have done things to irritate you, and when others of us have said things to offend you?

By all rights and purposes everyone of us could find a pretty good reason to be somewhere else on Sunday morning besides the House of the Lord. Everyone of us could find a pretty good reason to leave our Bible closed day after day. Everyone of us could find a pretty good reason to doubt God's promises; to have a closed mind to His Word; to hold a grudge against someone here; to stop supporting Jesus' church, put our money elsewhere, and focus upon other things in life.

The odds against us are overwhelming...and yet here you are listening to the Word, applying it to your life. Here you are supporting the church with your time and money. There you are at home with God's Word open in your hands day after day. There you are forgiving those who have wronged you, loving those who irritate you, doing good to those who are not nice to you, and all because you trust in Jesus who forgives you, and loves you, and gives you good things. Here you are, the one or two survivors out of a hundred. I don't know how, but here you are, and next week here you will be again, and the next week, and the next. It has become your way of life to grow in the Word of God even though there is so much working against that growth...and I, for one, have to stop trying to figure it out. It's like Jesus says in our text, "A man scatters seed on the ground; he sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how."

One thing I do know...I didn't do it. The man scattered the seed on the ground, but the growth of the seed did not come because of him. And your growth in the seed of the Word is not because of your

pastor, even though books are selling like hotcakes telling pastors the secrets to getting their churches to grow. The fact that any sea turtles survive, and that some of the seed scattered by the sower grows and matures, and that you develop into faithful Christians is all by the hand of God. It's not some secret; it's a mystery of the faith to believe that God will cause growth through the seed of His Word.

The man in our text does not scatter the seed on the ground and then sit down and figure out the odds of whether it will grow and mature. The odds makers are in Vegas, but here in Augusta God is at work; and there is no luck involved. Your being here, your study of the Word, your faith and hope and love are all the result of His plan and purpose in Christ Jesus.

Today's parable of the sower and the seed does not focus on the seed that fell every which way and resulted in no growth. This parable focuses on the seed that grew, on the seed that fell on good soil, that survived all the obstacles and predators, and developed--the blade, the ear, then the grain, and matured and ripened. And isn't that you? This man who scatters seed here in Augusta needs to stop trying to figure out why the seed of the Word does not take root and grow in others, and thank God that it grows in you. This sower needs to pray the Lord of the harvest to cause growth in every ear and heart where the seed falls, but then work with you where God is right now causing growth. This sower needs to stop worrying why the seed is growing faster in some but slower in others, and just thank God that it is growing at all.

The growth comes from God, not from the one who sows the seed. It also does not come from you. It is a devilish trap to think, "Of course the seed of the Word is growing in me...I'm good soil after all." Remember who you were. "We were dead in our trespasses and sins." "We were objects of God's wrath." You and I are turtles who should have been devoured. We are soil that was worthless and not worth wasting seed on. But God is merciful. He gave His seed to the sower. He commanded the sower to sow the seed of His Word within you. And He caused the seed to sprout and grow in you. Is it because He loves you more than those out there who have no use for Him? No. Is it because He saw something in you that told Him the seed would grow in you? No. Your love for Jesus and His Word; your love for His worship; your desire for His Sacrament; your faithfulness, and love for the saints; your support of the ministry; your dedication to this congregation; your forgiveness toward others and your trust in God's forgiveness for you is all because of the mercy of God toward you in Christ Jesus. Why is the seed of God's Word growing in you? It's not because of you or me. It's God who does this.

For 150 years God has caused growth here in Augusta. Through rainstorms and through famines; through the scorching heat of troubled times; through times when predators attacked from without and within; through world wars; through the years of the Great Depression; through prosperous times, this church has seen growth by the hand of God. Has that growth remained constant? No. Sometimes we grew in numbers; sometimes our numbers decreased. But always God was causing growth within those who were hearing His Word. And today that is you. Will our congregation survive another 150 years? The odds makers would bet against it. But it's not up to them; the growth comes from God. As long as His Word is faithfully preached and taught here, and as long as you faithfully hear it and study it, there is no limit to the growth God may bring about.

And whatever things I, as your pastor, have done to hinder that growth...I'm sorry. And I thank God that He uses me as His sower here in spite of my weaknesses and faults. Whatever things you have done to hinder growth here, God forgives you. You can be sure of this. Christ died for this reason, so that you may grow in Him trusting that you are forgiven for every offense you have done. The devil

hates for you to hear this, because when Jesus' forgiveness is placed into your ears, he cannot devour you for a meal; he cannot choke you out with his thorns and thistles. Satan knows that your growth in Christ is always about the word of pardon and peace that you hear; it's about you believing, by the mercy and working of God, that you are and remain God's forgiven saint for Jesus' sake.

With that forgiveness, and it's yours, you can safely make the journey from the nest down to the sea. You can wait with joy for the harvest, for God is causing the full grain to ripen in your heart and life. Who cares if the odds of your survival are stacked against you--you have Jesus on your side! Amen.