

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin R. Eden

Pentecost 6
Saturday, July 11, 2020 at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, July 12, 2020 at 9:00 a.m.

“It Shall Not Return to Me Empty”

Isaiah 55:10-13

In 1996, some archeologists in China discovered a seed for a lotus flower in ruins dating around the year 700 A.D. They were very excited by this discovery. I am fascinated by the field of archeology, but the more I study it, the more I realize that archeologists are an odd breed of people. They are capable of getting very excited over finding a flower seed.

They were excited about discovering this lotus seed, but their excitement turned to amazement when after applying water, that 1300 year old seed sprouted and grew.

In our Gospel lesson, we hear Jesus compare the Word of God to seed sown in a field. Like that lotus seed, the Word of God can lie dormant for a long time, but as the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, “It shall not return to Me empty.”

This Biblical truth that the Word of God never returns empty empowers pastors with confidence to keep preaching; it enables parents and Sunday School teachers to have patience with the children; it fills the laity of the church with courage, and instills missionaries with a vision of the future. God’s Word will never return empty. It is easy to become discouraged when we don’t see immediate results after sowing the seed of the Word.

Pastors can become discouraged when the pews are not full – even when

there are extenuating circumstances, like a worldwide pandemic. Parents become discouraged when their children seem to be, shall we say, inconsistent in demonstrating a life of faith. And sometimes you get to have a week like I had and get to baptize a 79 year old man with terminal cancer. I didn't plant the seed of the Gospel, but I watered it and got to see it grow.

It is good to remember that like a seed, God's Word is living and active even when we can't yet see it at work. When you plant your garden, you can't dig up the seeds every other day to see if they are germinating or growing. You have to let it grow. You cannot impose your will or force growth to happen. Life only happens through the presence of God.

God's living Word has been planted in you. Through the waters of Baptism, life has sprouted forth in you. We gather here so that this new life is nurtured and cultivated. When we stay away from Christ's Word and His church, the thorns and weeds of this world are allowed to grow and the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth, as Jesus says, can choke it and make it unfruitful.

This is one of my greatest fears with this long shutdown and restriction on public gatherings. My greatest fear is that people are going to become comfortable not coming to church. That will become their habit. The Seed of the Gospel which has been planted needs to be nurtured. During a drought year, the farmer can't explain to the seed why it needs to grow even though there is no water.

Within the children of God, once the Seed of the Gospel has sprouted forth and the plant begins to mature, that new life needs the water of life and the field needs to be cultivated so that the life born of that seed may continue to grow. The life within you; the faith created at your Baptism through water and the Word

– as it matures, further care is needed.

That is what we are doing here this evening/morning. A few weeks ago we heard Jesus say that He comes with a sword to cut and divide. He cuts out that which is evil. He cuts out the weeds and the thorns of sin. In the Confession and Absolution, and in His own Body and Blood, He cultivates us; He strengthens us; He forgives us; and He changes the landscape of our lives.

We also need instruction and nurturing so that we are rooted in God's Word. Shallow faith is generally a short-lived faith. If faith has no root, it may spring up quickly, but if there is any trouble or persecution, as Jesus says, the person quickly falls away.

Having sound doctrine matters. As we have recently celebrated the 490th Anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, it brings me comfort in my faith and confidence in my preaching that Confessional Lutherans are the only group of Christians who have not made significant changes to their doctrine over the past 400+ years (and that includes some church bodies who have only been around a relatively short while). What was taught by the Lutherans in the 1500's are the same words that I confessed to uphold 25 years ago when I was ordained, or 11 years ago when I was installed as your pastor.

Many people today make the mistake of defining "success" in the church simply in statistical numbers. As a pastor, the measure of my ministry is not found in mere numbers on a given weekend.

The success of a farmer is not simply determined by the number of acres that get planted. You must have good seed. The weeds and all sorts of critters can do tremendous damage. Watering and cultivating takes time. And as Paul says in 1 Cor. 3, one may plant the seed, another water it, but God gives the growth. The success of a field is only seen when it is harvested, and this is all the

work of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, there is no way to calculate or quantify the effectiveness of the mission of this church – or any church (until the final harvest). Our task is to simply remain faithful in planting good seed and trust our Lord that His Word “shall not return empty.”

We are blessed to be a part of a Confessional Lutheran church body where catechetical instruction takes place and doctrinal standards are upheld – even if what Scripture says is not popular with the modern world.

It is not through clever arguments that you have been convinced to come here this evening/ morning. It is because the seed of God’s Word has been planted in you by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit uses Word and Sacrament as the way He comes to you. We call them His Means of Grace. We then carry what God has given us out to those whom He has placed in our path. The Gospel is disseminated in the world by the words and actions of ordinary people like you and me.

We speak God’s Word. Children are baptized. Sometimes adults are baptized. Christ’s Body and Blood are shared. God’s living and active Word is present in your hearts and in your mouths. God says, “It shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

It may take a long time for you to see the Word at work in those whom you love. Keep planting the seed. Water it. Tend to it. Nurture it. It shall not return empty. Amen.