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### LESSONS FROM THE FARM

In today's gospel, we hear two parables, designed to help us better understand the Kingdom of GOD.

- To describe the Kingdom, JESUS uses images from farming life.
- People in HIS day knew a lot about farming, so they would understand the lessons HE was teaching.
  - Through these farming stories, JESUS wanted us to know some important things about the Kingdom, as well.

JESUS wanted us to understand that the Church as part of the Kingdom of GOD is first and foremost about:

- health and growth, not attendance and income statements;
- discipleship, not membership;
- mission and ministry, not programs and policy;
- welcome, not worthiness.
  - Like a plant, the Kingdom of GOD is a living organism; not a business.

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Today, so that we might better understand the Kingdom of GOD, JESUS tells two parables from the farm:

- two stories about seeds planted in the soil.
- In the first, those seeds grow up into a crop for harvest.
- In the second, a single seed grows into a great bush.
  - What is key, though, is that in each story the results happen *all by itself*.

The "All By Itself Principle" comes from Mark 4:28: *All by itself, the soil produces grain.*

- All by itself!

Farmers today have tremendous faith as they have throughout history.

- They can till the soil, plant the seeds, fertilize, weed, and water.
- They wait day and night; they sleep and they rise.
  - However, they are never sure if there will be a crop from their efforts.

But all by itself the soil produces grain, first the head, then the full kernel in the head,

- though to be honest, it is not quite all by itself.
  - JESUS tells us it is GOD alone who causes the seeds to germinate and grow.
    - No matter what the farmer does, it is GOD alone who causes the crop to come from the seed all by itself.

The lesson for us is this: We can do many things to try to make our church healthy, but it is GOD that causes the seeds to grow.

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So why do anything at all?

- Why give our offering?
- Why give our time and energy?
- Why do anything if it is all up to GOD?

The answer is that GOD wants us to participate in Kingdom growth.

- GOD alone causes the seeds to sprout.
- GOD alone causes the Kingdom to grow.

But not completely

GOD will only cause the seeds to grow that have been planted.

- Though we know GOD can cause growth to happen without us, GOD chooses to work through us and invites us to participate in Kingdom growth.
- We have a role to play in Kingdom growth—an important role.

Our role is like that of the apple tree.

- What is the mission of the apple tree?
  - To make apples? To grow fruit? No.
  - The mission of the apple tree is to become an orchard.

In the same way, our role is not just to take care of ourselves, but rather to carry out GOD's great mission in the world that will plant seeds for Kingdom growth.

- Our role is more than just producing apples year after year.
- It is to commit ourselves to give and to work so that each one of us multiplies ourselves in the congregation,
  - and that each congregation multiplies itself in the world becoming an orchard.

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This is the first step in Kingdom growth, committing ourselves to become an orchard.

- The second step is about harvesting.

GOD invites us to share in GOD's mission in the world;

- the growing of an orchard;
- the building of the Kingdom.

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To do this harvesting, these parables suggest two essential steps.

The first part of harvesting is that we reap.

- I know that sounds backward, but truth be told, we harvest from the seeds previously planted.

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We are fortunate to have many good ministries and programs here at St. Andrew.

- Some of these were begun—planted if you will—by us.
- But some were planted by those who were here before us.

We can reap for ourselves and for those we bring here because of what was done in previous seasons of planting.

- I am grateful for my predecessors who did so much planting before me: Pastor Skip, Pastor Stephanie, Pastor Steve, Pastor John, and many others.
- I appreciate those who previously served on council and committees, and volunteered their time, their energy, and their resources to bless this congregation and others in our community and world.
  - The crop that we can bring in today is due in part to what was planted in years past.

Yet many congregations struggle today because they, or those before them, did not step out in faith and look to the needs of the future.

- Those congregations were satisfied with just growing apples for themselves.

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We have been blessed with a legacy of vision and commitment to the Kingdom of GOD.

- We continue to develop new ministries with a vision that emphasizes looking outward and serving our community.
  - As we invite others to partake in what we have to offer here, we can reap a harvest for the kingdom.

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The second part of harvesting is that we sow.

- Like those before us, we plant seeds for the harvest of the future.
  - The offerings we give each week and the time we spend in planning and in service are reflections of our commitment to Kingdom growth.
- It would be easy to focus our giving of time and talents only on maintaining what we have.
  - Doing so, though fails to look toward a future where St. Andrew continues to serve those who come here and those who live around us with the good news of GOD's Kingdom.

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It is hard with today's economy to think about even maintaining, much less, increasing our commitment to GOD's work through St. Andrew.

- I know from talking with farmers that each year it is hard to think about taking their profits and putting them into the ground for a crop in the future.

The decisions each of us makes on giving is a reflection of our faith and trust in GOD.

- GOD does not want us to be frivolous in our personal giving.
  - But GOD does invite us and call us to share in the work of growing the Kingdom.

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Our gifts of time and talents are not just for ourselves—they are for the future of St. Andrew Lutheran and our commitment to the Kingdom of GOD.

- They are also a reflection of our trust, our faith in GOD.

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We have been blessed with a wonderful farm called St. Andrew Lutheran Church.

- We are blessed to be able to reap the fruits of those who came before us and planted seeds that GOD caused to grow.

The harvest that others will reap in the future depends on the seeds we sow now,

- seeds in the lives of people who don't have a meaningful relationship with GOD;
- seeds that show our hope for GOD's future;
- seeds that witness to our trust in GOD to make them grow;
- seeds that will continue to bless;
- seeds that might multiply and result in the growth of great orchards that spread the word of GOD throughout the world and bring others to experience the gracious love of GOD.

This is the farm to which GOD has entrusted us.

- We have been blessed with the resources needed to keep the farm going and growing.
  - The question before us today is, "Do we just want to produce fruit for ourselves, or do we want to become an orchard?"