

**Isaiah 55:10-11 - The Word Works**  
**(Pastor John Dolan: Pentecost 8/July 26, 2020 - St. John's Newburg, WI)**

*Is your church growing?* More than a few times over the years I've been asked that question. Usually what is meant is, *are you growing in size or numbers?* There were many times when I had to answer, *no*. Numerically, we had not grown that much. But that question leads to others. Is that the only way to measure growth? Can you always put a number on it? Can you, should we, try to tangibly measure the Holy Spirit using the gospel to bring people to saving faith and to keep people in faith in Jesus? Does the Bible's message need help—some strategy, some program, or even a gimmick or two to make the church grow? What should we be doing to build, grow, and sustain God's church?

The readings for today help with those kinds of questions, and Isaiah's words in today's first lesson have something to say about church growth—church growth God's way! God's Word is the tool for growth. God's Word has the power for growth. A simple way of expressing this classic, basic truth is simply this: **GOD'S WORD WORKS.**

***As the rain and the snow come down from heaven - so is my Word.*** Easy enough. As precipitation causes crops and plants to grow, God says, ***so is my Word.*** Some stuff doesn't grow without water; faith doesn't grow without the Word. The Word grows the church.

God's Word teaches many things, but everything can pretty much be put into one of two categories: the law and the gospel. The law tells us how God expects us to live, and often fail to live. The gospel is "the good news" of Son of God Jesus, come into this world to live obediently for us, and to suffer the law's punishment of death and hell in our place. Both law and gospel are the Word of God, but the law, telling people what to do, doesn't make faith grow. Only the gospel can do that. Telling people about Jesus as their ticket to eternal life grows faith. So when Isaiah says that God's Word is the tool for church growth, he means the gospel Word. In Isaiah's day, the gospel pointed to a Savior who was to come. In our day, it points back to Jesus as the Savior who has come, lived, died, and lives again for us.

Well-meaning people might say things like *I will do anything short of sinning to bring more souls to Christ.* That sounds commendable. But let's be careful. Do *anything* besides sin? Is the seed in the parable we read earlier just *anything*? The seed is the Word, that gospel word.

I remember an outreach brochure congregations could use called: *How to Choose Your Church.* It wasn't what most expected it would be. When inviting people to church, what reasons are given? *Great facilities! We're warm and friendly! We've got all the right programs for families! Our pastor is witty and handsome.* Those things may or may not be true, and for the most part it's all well and good. Certainly, we need to always work at putting our best foot forward, and there's no excuse for getting stale or doing nothing, being un-welcoming, or unfruitful. But none of that is by itself the Gospel Word.

The church building cannot bring people into the Holy Christian Church. Nice, friendly people can present the gospel, but they aren't the gospel. Who doesn't want to like their pastor, but the preacher was not crucified for you. Yet there can be at least a little part of us that thinks that the key to church growth is something other than the Word of God. But if you replace God's Word with something else, you cut off the only spiritual water supply that can quench parched and thirsty souls. The Word of God is God's tool for church growth. The Word of God is where you will come in contact with the grace and forgiveness of Christ. And along with the Word, comes the sacraments, which have been rightfully been called *the visible Word.* This is how the Spirit hydrates your thirsty soul! This is how God calls, *gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith,* through the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Some have suggested that God has designed some things from everyday life to reflect spiritual realities. Like—you work outside in the yard and you get dirty. So, you clean up. Water cleans your body. In

holy baptism, the word connected with the water of baptism cleans your soul. Again, God through Isaiah says, ***As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*** Rain doesn't come and just evaporate without doing what it does. God's Word does not evaporate without doing what it does. The Word works. ***It will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.***

Think of that farmer sowing seed. The seed fell on different soil. Three out of four landing spots did not produce lasting results. Do you think Jesus planned only 25% yield? His parable reminds us that not every seed grows and for a variety of reasons, and that's on us. Not every time the gospel is sown does a person respond positively and come to faith. It can be frustrating! Too often our message seems to fall on deaf ears, fruits are not produced. If our sinful nature cannot convince us to try something else to do the job, it might try to convince us that the Word is not as powerful as God claims it to be.

Lest we forget the power of God's Word, Isaiah reminds us. The Word works. Let's use the powerful tools God has given! \*The Word is powerful enough to bring spiritual life and growth to parched, burdened, distracted lives. \*The Word is powerful enough to deliver forgiveness to repentant souls that have disobeyed his will or doubt his promises. \*The Word is powerful enough to take the holiness of Jesus from 2,000 years ago and make it count as yours before God! \*The Word is powerful enough to take the shed blood of Jesus and apply its forgiveness to hearts and lives like ours. \*The Word is powerful enough to take the resurrection of Jesus and turn it into the preview and guarantee of your resurrection. \*God's Word has the power to grow love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How often don't you and I fail to *read, learn, and take* this Word to heart? Yet, what does God do anyway? He keeps sending the rain. With it he assures us that sins are forgiven, we are his children, he's in charge now, and he's preparing a home in heaven for us.

Without water this body does not function well. Without the water of life souls do not function well. We need to soak in God's Word in worship, in Bible reading, and in prayer and devotional life! We need to soak up God's Word and expect results and fruit in our lives. We need the Word and so does everybody else! So, go ahead. Read, listen, learn. Let's God's Word rain on you. Drink from it deeply and shower it on your world generously.

Werner Franzmann, one of our church body's gifted hymn-writers, a fine Christian man and lover of the Word wrote:

*Preach you the Word and plant it home / To those who like or like it not,  
The Word that shall endure and stand / When flow'rs and mortals are forgot.  
Though some be snatched, and some be scorched / And some be choked and matted flat,  
The sower sows; his heart cries out, / "Oh what of that, and what of that?"  
Preach you the Word and plant it home / And never faint; the Harvest-Lord  
Who gave the sower seed to sow / Will watch and tend his planted Word.*

The Word works. Work the Word. Somehow, some way, work the Word. Then watch God's church grow.