

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 7
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Only God can make it grow

—1 Corinthians 3:5-11

Many of you know that I like to fix things. There is great satisfaction in finding out, for example, that your broken garage door opener that costs hundreds of dollars to replace can actually be fixed with a \$0.40 capacitor (yes, that's 40 cents!), a little bit of soldering, and some help from YouTube. Once you know how to change your own oil on the car, it's very easy, it saves money, and you can be sure it's done correctly.

Of course, if you're going to fix things, it's going to require tools, and over time I've acquired a few tools to work on different kinds of things. Woodworking tools. Electrical tools. Vehicle maintenance tools. I was thinking the other day, what is my most common go-to tool? What's the tool that I use more than anything else? The tool that if it got lost or stolen or broken would have to be replaced immediately? Any guesses? Here it is: my DeWalt cordless drill/impact driver. I use this thing all the time for fixing, drilling, installing and removing screws, taking things apart and putting them back together. It's easily the number-one tool in my collection of tools.

Today, our Scripture lesson talks about two things that require tools: gardening and building. And not only does God give us the tools to garden and to build in his kingdom, but God himself actually uses his own tool to make things happen. The tool that God uses to do his work is his Word, especially his gospel—the good news of forgiveness in Jesus. The Word is God's tool through which he works, and it's actually fun to go through Scripture and see how many times God's Word is described in "tool" terms. For example, in Jeremiah, God says that his Word is like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces. (Jeremiah 23:28,29). And we can picture God's Word doing just that—it strikes our stubborn, hard hearts with a message of repentance, and it breaks our pride into little pieces and humbles us before God. In other places God's Word is called a "sword" (Ephesians 6) and a "lamp" (Psalm 119). All different kinds of tools describing God's Word.

In 1 Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul is talking about what makes the church grow. Remember, these are words written by a man who was, perhaps, the greatest missionary who ever lived. He went from town to town, preaching and teaching and starting churches and appointing elders. If anyone could have ever said, "I started this church, and I started that church, and I got that ministry going, and I grew that little mission into a thriving church," it would have been Paul the apostle. But he doesn't talk like that. Instead, he says about himself and his coworkers, *"What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? They are ministers through whom you believed, and each served as the Lord gave him his role. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but it is God who causes the growth."* God makes the church grow! That's it! Not charismatic people, not techniques, not great plans and brilliant visions. Not buildings, not campuses. Those are just instruments, just means to an end. Only God can make it grow!

And the tool God uses to make his church grow is his Word. We have such a high appreciation for God's Word as the tool, that we even have a name for it. We call it "the Means of Grace." The Means of Grace is the gospel, the Good News of Jesus and his salvation. God works with his gospel through the Word that is preached and taught and through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. That's where God works. That's how God works—through his Word. This is a really important truth to nail down and understand because there's lots of confusion about this in our world today; people think God speaks to them in their dreams or visions or feelings. There were times in the past God when inspired his prophets and apostles, and he confirmed the preaching of his Word with miracles and tongues. There were times in the past when God delivered a message to certain people through dreams and visions. But that is not the way God *usually* spoke to his people. People have the idea that the whole Bible is full of dreams and visions and miracles, but the reality is God only used those very rarely and only at certain times in history—for example, during the time of Moses, during the time of the Elijah and Elisha, and during the time of Jesus and his Apostles. In fact, the LORD said through the Prophet Jeremiah that he was fed up with all the false prophets of the day blathering on saying, "I had a dream! I had a dream! How long will this be in the hearts of these lying prophets? These prophets proclaim the fantasies of their own hearts" (Jeremiah 23:25, 26). God's response was, "Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream. But let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully" (Jeremiah 23:28). In the time of the apostles, the Apostle John says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). In other words, test everything to make sure it agrees with the Word of God!

So why is God's Word so powerful? It's because God's Word is not just facts and information—although it is factual and historical—it is food for the soul. When we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God in the flesh, our obedient brother, who was born under the law and kept the law, those aren't cute stories; that's the living proclamation

of God coming to rescue us sinners from eternal death. That is God's love for you in action. When we hear the gospel of Christ crucified and hear of Jesus suspended on the cross, covered in our guilt and shame, so that in him we have righteousness, that message is life and forgiveness and freedom from guilt. It's connection to God. It's what nourishes and feeds us. It refreshes our soul. The message of the cross is life and salvation and power. When God says to each of us personally, "I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have called you by name. You are mine!" and he points us to our Baptism, where we were born again of water and the Holy Spirit, that's not just information; your Baptism of water and the Word is adoption and new life. Holy Communion isn't just bread and wine; it's the true body and blood of Jesus—because that's what Jesus says it is, because of the *Word*. And it's not just a memorial snack; it's refreshment and joy and peace and fulfillment and strength for another round of spiritual warfare when we're back out in the world.

This is why we can never say, "I don't need to hear God's Word; I know all those things already." That's thinking of the Word as just facts, not food. My wife happens to be a very good cook. I can know about her cooking, I might even know where she keeps her recipes, and I might understand how she brings it all together, but it's only when I *eat* the delicious meal she prepares that I'm nourished and strengthened and benefitted by it. In the same way, we can know lots of information about the Bible, but it's only when we *hear* the Word that we're fed by the Word. Consume the Word, and your soul will be fed; leave it on the side, and you will be constantly spiritually hungry, even if you don't realize it. Drink deeply of the waters of life, and your soul will be refreshed, and your spiritual thirst will be slaked. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Only God can make us grow!

In the church it is very easy to be influenced or awed by numbers. When a megachurch is packed, it's easy to think, "Wow! They must have a good thing going there, because God is really blessing that church!" If a church is small, with only a few people, it's easy to think, "There must be something wrong." Let's not be deceived by outward appearances! I can point to one megachurch that draws a weekly attendance of over 40,000 people—a stadium-sized crowd!—and reaches millions more people around the globe with its broadcast ministry, and I can say unequivocally that the preacher is a false prophet, a wolf in sheep's clothing, who does not preach Christ crucified as the only way of salvation. That means there are 40,000+ people in person and millions more who are being deceived and led astray by a preacher who tells them what their itching ears want to hear. It looks like outward success, but the Day of Judgment will tell a different story. On the other hand, there are faithful pastors who declare God's Word faithfully to a handful of people. They're not charismatic or dynamic or wildly popular, but they preach the whole counsel of God and administer his sacraments according to Jesus' institution. In this world they might be shunned and persecuted. They might get the door slammed in their face because people don't want to hear the truth of God's Word. But on the Last Day, the Lord Jesus will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Does that mean big is bad and small is good? Of course not! It means that what matters is not the numbers but the true and faithful Word of God. *"In keeping with the grace of God given to me, as a wise master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. But let each person be careful how he builds on it. In fact, no one can lay any other foundation than the one that has been laid, which is Jesus Christ."* Use the Word, share the truth of Christ, and leave the results with God because God makes it grow.

If the Word is the tool, and the power is in the Word, then the power is not in you or me. Stop and let that sink in for a second. Since God makes it grow, he takes off your shoulders any pressure to make it feel like *you* are responsible for making the church grow. Maybe you've shared your faith with a friend, perhaps invited them to church, and they told you they're not interested. Or they asked you a question that you felt you couldn't answer. Either way, you came away asking yourself, "Did I say something wrong? Could I have done something different?" It's easy in moments like that to feel like a failure. Listen, if that's a failure, then the Apostle Paul is among the greatest failures of all! He was beaten, imprisoned, taunted, ridiculed. How did he respond? He just kept preaching. In 2 Corinthians 4, the Apostle Paul says, "We have renounced shameful, underhanded methods. We do not operate in a deceitful way, and we do not distort the word of God. Instead, by proclaiming the truth clearly, we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5). He kept telling the greatest story ever told of God's love in Jesus Christ that forgives sin and gives eternal life. He shared the gospel. And God made it grow.

So, brothers, and sisters, share the Word. Unleash the power of the Holy Spirit. You don't have to be a salesperson. You don't have to have a golden tongue. You don't have to have the answer to every question. You don't have to persuade people or twist their arms. You don't have to close the deal. You just plant. You just water the seed. You just share the Good News, just use the tool God has given us to use—his powerful Word. And God can make it grow. Amen.