

Sermon for Red Letter Challenge – Introduction –

Date: February 23, 2020

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Psalm 1

Epistle Reading: James 1:22-25

Gospel Reading: Matthew 7:24-29

Sermon Text: Matthew 7:24-29

Sermon Title: Red Letter Challenge – Introduction



Hymns:

W&P #29 – Come and See

W&P #13 – Awesome God

W&P #32 – Come to the Mountain

W&P #41 (LSB 806) – Give Thanks

W&P #123 – Shine, Jesus, Shine

Liturgy:

Divine Service: Creative Worship



Pastor James Groleau
St. John's Lutheran Church
1200 13th Avenue NW
Austin, MN 55912
Office: (507) 433-2642
Shepherd@JamesPlace.net
StJohnsAustinLCMS.org
FaceBook.com/StJohnsAustin
Twitter.com@StJohnsAustinMN
FaceBook.com/Shepherd.James.Groleau
KAUS 1480 AM Sun. 9:00am



Text: Matthew 7:24-29

Everyone who hears what I say and obeys it will be like a wise person who built a house on rock. Rain poured and floods came. Winds blew and beat against that house, but it did not collapse because its foundation was on rock.

Everyone who hears what I say but does not obey it will be like a foolish person who built a house on sand. Rain poured and floods came. Winds blew and struck that house. It collapsed, and the result was it fell with a great crash.”

When Jesus finished saying these things the crowds were amazed at his teachings. Unlike their experts in Moses’ Teachings, he taught them with authority.

NOTE: Copyright information.

Bible Translation: GOD’S WORD®, © 1995 God’s Word to the Nations. Some readings have been adapted to better reflect the original Greek or Hebrew.

Credit for Images:

Pronunciation for difficult words are contained in { }

© 2020 James Groleau.

Permission is granted to use these sermons for any non-profit purpose. I only ask that credit, as to their origination, be noted appropriately.

Grace, mercy and peace be yours in Jesus Holy Name. Amen.

I've been meeting with some folks here. We meet about twice a month. The discussion is centered around a book I recommended they read to help them see my vision for St. John's. It would be fair to say I've been frustrated here. I have successfully help grow five churches in a row.¹ When I got here I started just the way I had before, but something went wrong. Our congregation started to grow. In less than two years we had turned around. We were bringing in more people then were going out. Then it all stopped. 'Why' was my question.

It's no secret that some have not treated me and my family very well. I was here for about two months when I received a note telling me I was going to be run out of here. The truth is one person was calling me before I even accepted the call to try to manipulate me, through lies, to control this congregation. We have been lied to, and lied about, almost ceaselessly. Efforts to sabotage major projects continue.

Why do I bring that up? To get even? To get revenge? To put them in their place? No. (If you went through the book "Total Forgiveness"² you'll understand why. If you didn't go to that study, you should buy the book. It really is one of the most profound books I've read.) I bring all of this up because I want to show you why the Christian Church in America is failing.

We are failing, across America, because we have lost our mission. We have lost our purpose. We've lost our reason for being. We look at the "flash in the pan" large churches, and think they're doing something right, and so we must change everything to copy them. All of that while others are fighting to ensure nothing here changes. ... and so we are a house divided.³

1 St. Paul Lutheran – Sheboygan Falls
Asian-Indian Lutheran Mission – St. Louis, MO
St. Mark Lutheran – Ruskin, NE
Centennial Lutheran – Superior, NE
visi

St. Paul Lutheran – Hinckley, MN

2 Total Forgiveness, by R.T. Kendall, Charisma House; © 2007;
https://www.amazon.com/dp/1599791765/ref=cm_sw_em_r_mt_dp_U_7.arEbTY6D9KH

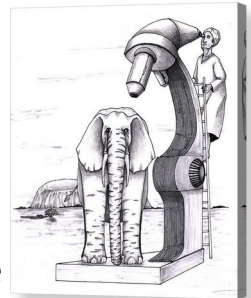
3 Matthew 5:25

Here at St. John's you have been through some turmoil. You have a history I did not know, and so could not understand. That history caused a lot of wounds and left a lot of scars. It created a situation where people are holding on to things tightly, to keep them safe. It created a lot of mistrust. The result is conduct which if you looked at it from the outside would look harsh and abusive, because it is.



We don't like to admit that. We don't like it when our "dirty laundry" is hung out on the line. We don't like it when the lights are turned on. We'd like to believe if we just ignore it things will eventually get better. It didn't. It won't. It hasn't.

You are not alone. Many many many congregations across America are facing the same problems; exactly the same problems. Their specific details may not be the same as yours, but the real problem, the heart of the matter, is the same. As the Christian Church in America, or as an individual congregation, we cannot grow until we've dragged that stuff out of the shadows and into the light to deal with it.



The first problem is perspective. If you are looking at an elephant with a microscope you're missing the picture. The problem is you're too close. You need to step back to get the full view. That is hard to do when you've been focused in close for so long. It's hard but absolutely necessary. You must see the whole problem to fix it.

The problem is: We have lost our mission. We have lost our purpose. We've lost our reason for being. So let's try to bring the picture into perspective. We don't need complex tools to do that. We just need to take a step or two back and look again.

The best way to do that here at St. John's would be to ask a visitor, someone who has not been here through the trials. Ask them what they observe. What would they see in this place from the outside looking in? There vision is trying to catch the whole picture because they're looking for places where they might

fit in. They don't know, can't see, and don't care about all the politics, history, and positions. They are looking for a "faith home." Even if they don't know what they really need, they do know they have a need. So they come in with their eyes wide open to see.

Now I have an advantage over most of you. I've spent a great deal of time with people who are not, and have never been, part of a Christian Church. My advantage is even greater because I've had conversations about faith with them. I've asked them what they are looking for. I've asked them what they believe. I've asked them why Christianity did not provide the answers.

What did they say? Why would they never walk into this building, or any church? (That was something I often heard.) Why do they think what they think about us?

Before I tell you the answer let me help you step back. Let me help you get a better perspective. Let me help you put the microscope down so you can see better. I've shared this account before but let me share it again:

Some coworkers and I went out for lunch one day. I don't recall the day of the week, but I do know it wasn't Monday. Our waitress was clearly having a bad day. She was clearly stressed and having trouble covering her own tables and the tables of someone who didn't show up for work. Some customers were grumpy and not interested in hearing why their food was not on the table.

When she came to our table I said, "Hey I know you busy, but just pause and take a breath." She paused and then cracked a little smile. Then I said, "At least it's not Monday."

Her response, "No Sunday!"

I said, "Why Sunday?"

“That’s when all the Christians come out after church.
Their rude, impatient, they never tip and they leave a
huge mess!”

Now it’s not hard for any of you to see she was not a Christian. She did not go to church. Do you think she would go, if she was invited? Not a chance. Why? Because we have lost our mission. We have lost our purpose. We have lost our reason for being. The specifics may change but the problem remains the same. The outside world sees Christians primarily as: judgmental, hypocritical and divisive. That is what they expect when they walk in the door. ...and like most churches they would find that here.

My first goal in coming here was to help you break that perspective; to be a welcoming church. To make you a church that would change people’s perspective and perception because they visited here. We have lost our mission. We have lost our purpose. We’ve lost our reason for being. The problem for me here, was defining that problem for you. So that you could see it.

My experience is very different from yours. I have been in growing church, and an instrumental part of growing those churches, for over 20 years. You have a history I did not know, and so could not understand. In meetings that I’ve been having I got some help in defining the problem for you.

The real problem is: “Our Why.” Why are we here? Why do we exist? We have to answer those two questions as the Christian Church in America, and as St. John’s Lutheran Church in Austin, MN. Why are we here? Why do we exist? Once we know “Our Why” we can better define “Our What.” What we do. What we see as our purpose.

So what is “Our Why?” Everyone knows this is a Christian Church. Everyone knows we worship Jesus here, but that is “what” we do. What is “Our Why?”

Let me show you something. You all know the song. Sing it with me:

Amazing grace
how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost
but now I'm found,
was blind but now I see.

That song has brought comfort to many since it was written about a hundred years ago. Many of you can sing it without looking at the page. You know “what” the notes are and you know “what” the words are. That’s “Your What” but “Your Why” is what matters.

Suppose: you're best friend died, your car broke down, you lost your job, your dog died and the broke down car rolled down the driveway over your last beer. (All the making of a good Country-Western song.) Through all of that the congregation, you haven't been to in years, reaches out to you. They show you they care. God calls you back. You return to the faith in Jesus as your Savior. Now when you sing that song it sounds like this:

Amazing grace
How sweet – sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost
but now –
now I'm found
I was blind
but now I see.

What's the difference? The difference is the “Why.” Once you define the “why” you know “What” to do. With out a “Why” the “What” gets lost.

We have lost our mission.

We have lost our purpose.

We've lost our reason for being.

The “Why” for our Red Letter Challenge is to, as a congregation, redefine our “Why.” To refocus our sight on what matters. That means some things will change. Some things will go away. But before we can explore any change we need to define what cannot change:

Our doctrine
Holy Scripture
Our Confessions
The Means of Grace

cannot change. ... and while I am here they will not change, no matter how diligently some may try to connive, scheme and lie to force me to change it.



Also our Mission Statement will not change. In fact our Mission Statement will help give direction to re-finding our “Why.” The purpose of going through the Red Letter Challenge, for our congregation, will be to refocus, redefine and rediscover “Why” we are here in this community. So that we can better know “What” we should be doing.

Throughout this time of Lent let us go to God with repentant hearts. Let’s ask God to give us clear vision and purpose and help us to see “The Why” He has defined for us. Then go forward remembering that:

God has made us what we are. He has created us in Christ Jesus to live lives filled with good works that he has prepared for us to do.⁴

My God grant us these things in Jesus’ holy Name.

Amen.

4 Ephesians 2:10