

Sermon for The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: July 12, 2020

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

Old Testament: Number 13:25-33

Epistle Reading: Hebrews 13:1-2,5-17

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sermon Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sermon Title: The Church is Dying in America

Introit: Psalm 108:3-5; Antiphon: Psalm 105:1

Hymns:

LSB 594 – God's Own Child I'll Gladly Say It

LSB 586 – Preach you the Word

LSB 827 – Hark the Voice of Jesus Calling

Liturgy:

Divine Service III, p. 184



The 'Change' Series

Songs:

Change My Heart

By Our Love

Father I Adore You

I Love You Lord

Liturgy:

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 13:1–9, 18–23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.

And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear...

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

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Grace to you, and peace, in Jesus' Holy Name. Amen.

The Church in America is dying. That hardly seems like a way to start a sermon, but it's true. The Christian Church in America is drying. The question is why? What happened? Why are people abandoning true salvation? What is going on?

The last several months have drastically changed the mission field, and the Church's ability to do what the Church was meant to do, bring Jesus to people living in darkness. The churches are more empty now than they were only a few months ago, (when they weren't really all that full.) Youth are leaving the Church by the droves and they're not coming back.

The church most of us knew, with packed pews and chairs in the aisle, has all but evaporated. In our lifetime we have watched our nation move from a nation proud of its Christian heritage, to a nation that in many places is trying to cleanse true Christianity from itself.

What are the faithful to do? How can we remain true to the truths of Scripture and our Confessions and grow? Some would say we can't. Some would say don't try, just quit, give up. Some want the church to last just long enough to get to their funeral. They see no need for the Church beyond that. They see no future for the Church beyond that. That is not the answer. I have spent the last 20 years in growing churches. I know how a church can grow. St. John's can grow. It all starts and ends with Jesus.

Jesus said:

I will build my Church,
and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.¹

The answer is get back to the basics. We have the Light. We live in a world of darkness. So shine the Light!

Over the next several months, once a month, we are going to have a message here about growing our church. We will look at where our church is, where our church needs to be, and where our church needs to go. We will look into why we need to get there, and then how we can get there. It will include "change." Lots of change.

Most studies project that by the year by 2030 the Christian affect in the United States will be almost nonexistent. Studies, even really good ones, done by people you can trust, predict the historic denominations in America will be a whisper of what they once were. (They already are.) Congregations, by the droves, will close.

1 Matthew 16:19

(They already are.) Many more will simply be an insignificant shadows of what they once were. (Look around you.) The Christian affect on society by 2020, by the people of God, will be almost nothing. That is not a happy outlook. It can be the only result of where we are currently going, and what we are currently doing. We must change the way we do things.

Right now only 16% of congregations in America are growing. Only 16%! The truth remains by 2030 there won't be much left of what we have known. Ask any thinking congregation leader and they will tell you they feel the burden in many and varied ways. Congregations feel it too. You feel it too, which is why we ask, "Why?" Why can't:

- more work...
- more programming...
- better preaching...

... take us back to the glory days we once knew. We'd like to believe those things will help. We'd like to believe that will work. It can't. It won't. That is a reality we simply must accept. This COVID epidemic has only accelerated the predictions of a dying Church.

Look in any metropolitan area in the U.S., churches are almost gone. I can tell you the pastor-champions, that are serving there, often feel undervalued or abandoned and forgotten by the rest of the Church. You don't have to look so far away. Count the number of people under 50 in this, or most any congregation on any given Sunday. You only need to open your eyes to see a church that is slowly dying away. Look back at what's been happening and how fast it has happened. Remember when we used to set up chairs for extra seating? Now look to the future and you arrive at a "not much left" 2030-church.

We must accept the harsh reality of losing what we've grown to love, and then start to imagine what God might be planning to do next. We must begin to pray for the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, to create, empower and guide us into what comes next, for us, for His Church, and for those people who still live in darkness right here in this town.

When we look out into that world, just outside those doors, we feel more like the children of Israel before they entered Promised Land. We look into that place and we see:

- Powerful giants.
- Jericho-size walls.
- Ominous obstacles.

We feel like the 10 spies who gave council to turn and run.² We would rather turn back in fear, hide behind our walls of comfort, and let the world and the Church fall to Satan. We look out over the landscape and we can't imagine winning, so we plan to fail.

Are these problems really too big for the God? Do you really believe and confess God has left the building? Do you really accept God cannot, or will not, do anything? Actions speak louder than words. How are you acting?

This is the Lord God of Armies who...

- Brought His people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm.
- Parted the Red Sea.
- Provided for them in the wilderness.

... and now, what? He's tired?

We need to be willing to take risks. We must be willing to try new things, knowing that some, perhaps many, of those new things will fail. We are in uncharted territory. We are heading into a place where the tools and talents upon which we depended in the past are no longer the solution for the future. More than that they are the cause of problems for the future.

What was done in the past is suffocating the Church now. We need new tools, new talents, and new ideas. The challenge in front of us is more difficult than we have imagined, and this congregation is not going to arrive at a better future unless we discover together how to change. This congregation has done nothing but dwindle for over 20 years. What you have been doing is not working. What you've been doing is dying. It is time to change. What will change? Let me answer that by stating first what will not change:

- God's Holy, inspired, inerrant, sacred Word in its entirety, and all that it teaches, will not change while I am the pastor here.
- The "Symbols of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod." The Book of Concord, the truths contained in the three ecumenical³ creeds, and the Small and Large Catechism will not change while I am the pastor here.
- The Sacraments⁴ given to the Church by Jesus Christ will not change while I am the pastor here.

As your pastor this is my first priority. This is the mantle placed on my shoulders. Your souls, and what is taught in this church, are on me. God's Word

2 Number 13:25-33

3 'Ecumenical' means: universally accepted

4 'Sacraments' are the sacred, or holy, acts.

makes it clear I will answer for it.⁵ The message of salvation for all people must be clearly and consistently proclaimed. It is my intention for St. John's to be the brightest beacon of the Way, the Truth, and the Life in this city. It should be yours too!

To do that, and to be that, we cannot sit helplessly on our hands as victims, hoping the Church lasts long enough to get to our funeral. We must have a mind and heart for the generations to come. We must have a heart and mind that is willing to sacrifice anything and everything except the Word, the Symbols and the Sacraments to bring that Truth to anyone and everyone who will hear it.⁶

In the past we defined the mission by the number of people yet to hear the Gospel. That does not define the mission. The mission opportunity will no longer be measured by the numbers needing to be reached. The mission opportunity going forward is measured by the number of baptized people of God taught and trained to walk into the mission field and the number of people to whom they talk. That means you! That is diametrically opposite to what you have been conditioned to think.

What brought us here, through the decades past, has trained us to think in ways that can do nothing but fail in the future. We now go out into a culture that no longer values going to church as a good thing. People will not come here just because we mention Jesus. The culture outside our church walls is uncaring, and often hostile, toward the Church, the Church's message, and the Church's Savior.

People outside this church think we are bigots, self-righteous, judgmental and intolerant. Our goal, from this time forward, is to change that perception. We will change it by the way we act, the way we run this church, and the way we reach out to help people who need help. That is how the Church grew in its earliest years. Listen to what the Bible records:

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.⁷

Our view needs to change from staring at empty pews in fear, to looking for people to fill them. To fill them not for their money, or to plug them into boards, or to do anything beyond having them hear the Gospel.

5 Hebrews 13:17 – Obey your leaders and submit to them, **for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.** Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

6 1 Corinthians 9:22-23 – I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, to save at least some.

7 Hebrews 13:1-2

These people may be from families that have never walked into a church, ever. They may have never opened a Bible, or even have one in their house. They are truly walking in Darkness. They are why we are here! They are the ones Jesus came to save.⁸ We, the people of St. John's, are here for such a time as this.⁹

This is our new starting point. This is where we are now. We are here to run the good race. Our last days should be marked as were St. Paul's. He wrote shortly before his execution:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.¹⁰

God's peace to you.

Amen.



**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**

8 Mark 2:17 – Jesus said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

9 Esther 4:14 – ... who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

10 2 Timothy 4:7-8