

Sermon for The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

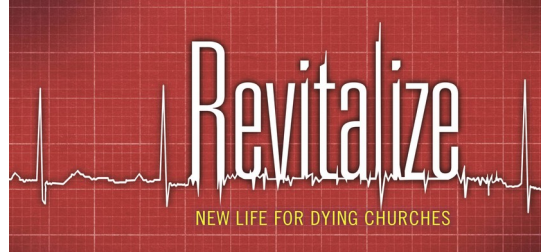
Date: August 23, 2020

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

First Reading: Revelation 3:15-22

Epistle Reading: James 4:1-12, 17

Gospel Reading: Matthew 12:22-32



Sermon Text: Matthew 12:22-32

Sermon Title: Can a Dying Church Live?

The 'Change' Series

Hymns:

- LSB 664 – Fight the Good Fight
- LSB 660 – Stand up Stand up for Jesus (1-3)
- LSB 660 – Stand up Stand up for Jesus (4)
- LSB 658 – Preserve your Word O Savior

Liturgy:

Divine Service: Sola Scriptura

Songs:

- Lord Reign in Me
- You Are My All in All
- A Shield About Me
- Shout to the Lord
- We Believe

Liturgy:

Creative Worship



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Text: Matthew 16:13–20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

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Grace to you and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

We're falling back into the "Change Series." We'll have one message a month exploring how our church can, and should, be growing. Last month's message included some somber and distressing information. The Church in America is dying. In fact only a very small 16% of Christian church are growing. So wouldn't it make sense to explore the churches that are growing, and look for a common denominator among them?

About 20 years ago, the congregation in which I was a member, in Sheboygan Falls, WI, was a church of about 400 in church every week, but like so many others, was slowly dying away. Over the next 6 years they saw unprecedented growth. We had multiple new member classes of 7-10 people in each, running concurrently. We were teaching members to facilitate these classes, and people were pouring into the building. The church grew to about 2,600 in worship every week. All of this in a town of only 7,000 people.

Already back then that got some attention. There were only a very few churches in the LCMS accomplishing anything like this across the nation, and church leaders wanted to know how it was done. That congregation was joined with about ten others, from around the country, to explore what brought this kind of success. There were some factors that helped some of the churches grow, including: their location, the surrounding population, and population growth in their area, but there were other churches in those same neighborhoods that did not grow, and not all of the growing churches had the same environmental factors.

From that study, and work, an event was born that has been running for years called "Best Practices for Ministry (BPM)." An event that happens annually at Christ Lutheran Church – Phoenix, AZ. That event has grown so large another BPM event is starting up in Indiana. At the heart and core of all this work, the predominating factor in growing churches was, and remains, hospitality and discipleship.

Churches that grow are churches that welcome people in a radically different way from everyone else. The one most significant thing that can be done for a church to grow is a display of radical hospitality. I've shared this before, but I'll say it again. I am irrelevant. People do not come to a church because of the pastor. They will continue to come to a church they have visited if you, the people, greet them with kindness, warmth and welcome. It goes without saying that bigotry, board assignments and bullying drive them out the door far faster than anyone could ever bring them in. It drives out those at whom such things are directed, and those around them.

You've all probably experienced visiting a church and had no one greet you or even say 'hello.' If you were looking for a Christian community would you want to join a church that cannot even say, 'Hello.'? If you wouldn't why would anyone else?

Step one in growing any congregation is to make anyone and everyone feel welcome. Whether they are new, or newly back, we need them to feel welcome and valued. Mostly because they should be welcomed and valued.

After radical hospitality comes discipleship. A disciple is one who invests their time, energy, skills, and life into become a better follower of Jesus, and living a life that reflects that to everyone they encounter. We're going to explore "discipleship" much more in the future.

First let's define the problem a bit more clearly, so we can see it and understand it.

- Churches generally tend to focus on making members, volunteers, listeners and attenders, but not disciples. If the goal is simply to put people in the pews you will fail massively. People do not want to be seen as a profit center or an account number. They want to be welcomed for who they are.
- Pastors, and a relative few in any given congregation, tend to do all the work. They are often stressed, tired, frustrated, and discouraged by the lack of commitment demonstrated by others. That often results one of two things: Lethargy or giving up, or "guilting" people into work. The problem is when the new people are seen as fresh muscle to put to work, instead of people to put to the Word. Our sense of urgency should not be displayed as desperation or an eagerness to make assignments. People want to feel welcome, not seen as workers.
- The lives of people inside the church are often no different from those outside the church. Often members of a church do not stand out in the community. Their actions, words, and efforts look just like everyone else. The best way to advertise this church is for you to be active in the community using the name of our church where ever you go. Your words and actions should reflect what you want people to know about your church.
- Pastors are often the biggest problem. Although the pastor is irrelevant in bringing people to church they often have no idea how to help their members see how to bring visitors. Pastors generally are taught to preach, administer the Sacraments, go to meetings and visit the sick. I can tell you from personal experience that very little time is spent given a model for how to

invest in making disciples formed around the Word of God. Most of what I knew of that I had when I arrived at the Seminary and unfortunately I did not leave with much in addition to that.

- “Flash Churches” (large churches that pop up quickly) tend to center around a personality or program. They often center around a pastor, but they tend to last as long as the personality or program, and then fade away. They do not foster lasting discipleship and growth. They tend to focus on style without substance or depth. Their theology is often shallow, focusing on entertaining the congregation rather than discipling them.
- Church “scorecards” (or how people measure a church’s success) are always focused on counting attendance and offerings, but these things do not measure the faith-growth in a church. Just because you have people in the pews and coins in the coffers does not mean your church is healthy.

For a church to grow we need to make a strategic shift from scrounging members to making disciples, from acquiring attenders to being a teaching church that brings those living in true darkness into the marvelous light of Christ.

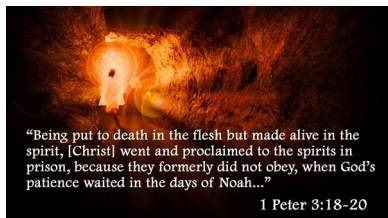
It seems like a daunting task. It is so different from what you’ve done before now. It is a problem where you’ve never done it that way before, so you don’t know how to do it. It brings you to a place that feels like chaos and confusion.

When all around is madness and there’s no safe port in view... go back to the beginning. What is one of the very first lessons you learned in Sunday School?

Jesus loves me this I know
for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong
They are weak but He is strong.

Yes Jesus loves me.
Yes Jesus loves me.
Yes Jesus loves me.
The Bible tells me so.

When everything seems like a mess, turn to Jesus. Jesus said:



I will build My Church,
and the gates of Hell will
not prevail against it.
(Matthew 16:18)



He wasn't kidding. The One who is speaking is the Holy One of God, Christ – the Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the One who was crucified and died for you. He defeated death, and went to stand in the Basilica of Beelzebub and proclaim His victory and authority over all. This is the One who said, “I will build My Church...”

Remember some years ago WWJD (What Would Jesus Do)? What did Jesus do in beginning to build His Church?

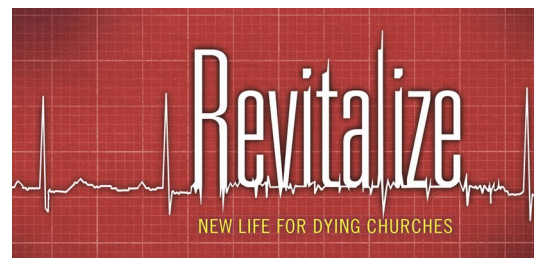
- He invited them: “Come, follow Me.”
- He challenged them: “You give (the 5000) something to eat.”
- He invested in them: “It is better to give than to receive.”
- He developed and taught them. (*Sending out the 72.*)
- He modeled compassion to them. (Luke 9:54 *And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” He turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.*)
- He demonstrated the Mission to them: “Zaccheus, I’m coming to your house today.”
- He loved them ...no matter what.
- He loved them ...too much to leave them where they were. He dragged them along to where they needed to go.
- He created accountability for them.

Jesus said:

Everyone who hears these words of Mine **and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (*Matthew 7:24*)

Jesus invested in them to help them reach the many. Reach the many they did. The twelve apostles in their short lives reached people from Spain to India. What they did we should do. What do growing churches do?

Churches in America today, that are growing, all share one common characteristic. They went back to the beginning. They started doing what Jesus did. They began to shrink the gap between what they were taught in church and how



they lived their lives. It starts not just by simply reading God's Word, or hearing God's Word, but reading and hearing and practicing God's Word. That is the life of a disciple.

This single shift of slowly learning to be a disciple, and then learn how to disciple others, who can disciple a few more, has done more to change the trajectory of congregations than anything else in the history of the Holy Christian Church.

- Congregations that were once dying begin to experienced surprising life and vitality.
- Churches that once kept themselves as isolated outposts began to engage and connect to their neighborhoods as representatives of Jesus.
- These congregations began to stabilize and then grow.
- Small churches, that others might ignore or dismiss, captured a vitality and direction of mission.
- They become larger churches who's members are not consumers and attenders, but Kingdom contributors.
- All of these churches then saw the younger generations return.

Here's the thing I really want you to see. If you hear nothing else this morning listen to this please! All of this we did in less than two years right here at St. John's. When I arrived you had been dying for at least 20 years, maybe more. In less than two years we had restored your youth program. We had visitors every week. We were bringing lost souls to Holy Baptism and into the family of God.

Then some set to work at shutting it down. Families that should have been invited and welcomed were distanced, ignored or worse. We as a congregation must pick a side. The battle lines have been drawn. Where do you stand?

Christ or Satan

Heaven or Hell

Life or Death

Jesus said:

Whoever is not with Me is against Me, and whoever does not gather with Me scatters.¹

1 Matthew 12:30

Jesus said:

I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

I counsel you to buy from Me:

- gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and
- white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and
- salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with Me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.²

The Bible says:

You have had countless Christian guardians, but you do not have many spiritual fathers... So I encourage you to imitate me.³

Churches grow because people began investing their time, energy, skills, and life in the discipleship of others while removing from them those who are at odds with Christ and His mission. They learned a simple model that showed ordinary people, who had been discipled, how to disciple others, who could disciple still others.

What are our next steps? First we need to take an honest look at our congregation and ask some tough questions.

² Revelation 3:15-22

³ 1 Corinthians 4:15-16

- Is there a “gap” between what is heard and how people live?
- If a popular function or program was discontinued, or we changed the time of the worship service would “consumers” go somewhere else, or would they reinvest themselves in helping members of the congregation grow?
- What do we have more of: disciples or volunteers? Disciples are interested in listening and following Jesus no matter the cost. They are those who will give up anything and everything to help others grow in the faith. Volunteers need to be constantly recruited.
- Is it possible that the biggest problem in our church is the lack of disciples who learn and follow the words and ways of Jesus?

Much of this, like last month, still sounds disheartening. Is there a path for St. John’s to take? Can we become a living, growing, congregation? Yes! But it will require some changes. It will require people to be like Paul, who said:

Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them... To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. 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, that I may share with them in its blessings.⁴

You see there must be change. The changes are what we will begin to explore in next month’s message. For now, take heart. The Church is dying, but not dead. St. John’s is not dead. We do have a vibrant future available to us. We do have all the resources we need to have that happen. It will happen if we follow God’s direction and guidance.

I leave you with the words St. Paul gave to Timothy:

I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God gave us a spirit, not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.⁵

Let us stand up for Jesus!

Grace to you in Jesus’ name. Amen.

4 1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23

5 2 Timothy 1:6-7

