

# Sermon for The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**Date:** September 20, 2020

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

**Old Testament:** Isaiah 42:1-7

**Epistle Reading:** James 2:1-7,14-17

**Gospel Reading:** Luke 14:7-24



**Sermon Text:** James 2:1-7,14-17

**Sermon Title:** What Makes the Church Grow

**Introit:** Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16; Antiphon: Psalm 116:17

*The 'Change' Series*

**Hymns:**

LSB 578 – Thy Strong Word Did Cleave the Darkness  
(V.1,3,5)

LSB 769 – Eternal Spirit of the Living Christ  
- LSB 910 – Now the Silence

LSB 680 – Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise (v.1,4,5)

LSB 690 – Hope of the World (*Tune: LSB 400*)

**Liturgy:**

Divine Service IV, p. 203

**Songs:**

Father I Adore You

By our Love

Humble Thyself In The Sight Of The Lord

Shine Jesus Shine

Way Maker

Open the eyes of my heart

**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  
Phone Streaming at: 518-906-1379  
KAUS 1480 AM Sun. 9:00am



**Text: James 2:1–7, 14–17**

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

**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 Pastor 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, peace and mercy in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **What makes the Church grow?**

Last month we asked, "Can a dying church live?" The answer is 'YES!' I've been part of growing the last five I've been in. They were all "dying." Some of them had already resolved to give up. Then they saw they could grow and they did. So how?

In these messages I have already explained that the predicted institutional Church of 2030 will be a whisper of what it is now. Here's the good news, over the last decade a growing Church has begun to emerge. The Church discovered that it could work with a lighter load. Less meetings, minutes and minutia. More action that actually helps people come to Jesus Christ.

- It invested in relational discipleship which radically changed the congregational culture. This is the single most important shift to foster growth.
- The Baptized people of God assumed their rightful place as missionaries. This is the second greatest shift responsible for fostering a growing a vibrant Church.

In spite of everything working against the Church, congregations with disciplined believers, who embody an air of excitement and deep abiding trust in God, attracted people.

Here's the sad news. A couple decades ago, when we saw the answer; when we shared our success with others; when we showed them that pure doctrine is not in the way, it is the way, most church leaders opted out of discipleship as a means to grow. They dismissed it, or didn't know how and were not willing to learn. They didn't recognize the power of starting small, with a few people. Most of their churches just got older and smaller. They didn't try, or care to try.

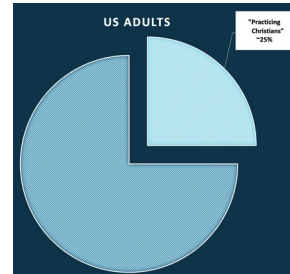
A few courageous pioneers made the jump and now the people of God, in those folds, see the Mission of God that is entrusted to them.<sup>1</sup> That is what you need to see. So what did they see? What did they do? They began to meet together in small groups.

- They eat meals together.
- They built relationships together.
- They shared life stories together.

1 **Matthew 28:19-20** – Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

- They spoke grace and truth from the heart of God as they represent Jesus together.
- They trust the Holy Spirit to transform and change lives through the Word.

It's striking to look at what has emerged from just a decade ago. A decade ago Only 25% of the U.S. population said they worshiped at least once a month, and that their faith was very important to them.<sup>2</sup>



Still a decade ago, 10 years after we discovered, (or rediscovered) discipleship, nearly all of the congregations in the U.S. were still focused on the 25% and ignored the exploding, and ever growing, 75% that were moving further and further away from God, His Word and His Church. In that same time frame churches were tagged as bigoted, exclusionary, judgmental and uncaring. (Everything the Church has never been and never should be.) Pastors became distrusted. Their representation in the media was as judgmental buffoons. They felt defeated. Many just gave up. What can we do?

Last week we learned what to do. Look to Jesus. What did Jesus do? Be what Jesus was when He walked among us.

- Jesus was identified as a friend of sinners.<sup>3</sup> (*Meaning a friend of people who don't go to church.*)
- Pharisees complained that He actually ate meals with tax collectors and sinners.<sup>4</sup> (*Would you invite an unbeliever into your house to show them what a Christian is?*)
- Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."<sup>5</sup> (*He was sent by a missionary God who wants His people back. (Jesus calls us to call them.)*)
- Jesus said: "As the Father sent Me so I send you."<sup>6</sup> (*We are sent to be missionaries.*)

It is those labeled as the "filth" of Austin, the rejected and despised that we should invite first. Not to endlessly hand out free stuff, but to put in place resources to help them help themselves, and then help them to help others. The Church needs

2 "A Snapshot of Faith Practice Across Age Groups" Barna, 2019.

3 **Matthew 11:19** – The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

4 **Luke 15:2** – The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

5 **Luke 19:10** – The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

6 **John 20:21** – Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

to be alive! In places it has come back to life. What is happening in growing churches today?

- Christians are disciplined to step over the “us and them” mind set between the church and the world.
- They demonstrated love and mercy personally, not just through institutions and institutional functions.
- They ran toward needs to fill them. They actively looked for needs they could fill.
- They functioned like the early Church (*That is the outlawed, persecuted Church that we’ve been looking at in the “God’s Greater Story” series that we’re running parallel to this one, walking through the book of Romans.*)
- They told the story of Jesus. They introduced people to a person. That person is Jesus.
- Believers gathered together welcoming “sinners” among them. (*“Sinners” would be anyone that others dislike simply because they are different.*)

The anger, hatred and distrust toward Christians was overcome. It was overcome one person at a time. It was done across kitchen tables and over backyard fences. Not from pulpits, projects and marketing campaigns.

The beliefs, values and behaviors of the 75% outside the Church turned out to be very different than those in the Church imagined, because the culture had changed so much. What those growing churches discovered was nearly everything they had been doing for decades was now a barrier to bringing people in.<sup>7</sup> The growing churches realized change was necessary to survive.

Why do we have to change?<sup>8</sup> We must change because it is now much more difficult to reach the people with the Gospel than it was 50 years ago.

On picture you see:

- “1” is a person with no faith. They have not started in their journey to becoming a Christian.
- “10” is a person in whom the Spirit of God has worked through the Word and Sacrament to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> To dig much deeper into this subject I’d strongly recommend the book: *“Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory”* by Tod Bolsinger

<sup>8</sup> **1 Corinthians 9:20-23** – To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the Law I became as one under the Law... that I might win those under the Law. To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law... that I might win those outside the Law. 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.



In 1960, the “average” unbelieving person in America knew:

- x some basics of the Christian faith, including the deity of Jesus.
- x absolute truth exists, and the Bible is a trustworthy source for that.
- x they viewed the Church, Christians, and Christian leaders in a favorable way.
- x they has a positive experience of church in their own personal life background.
- x they experienced a sense of guilt when they broke fundamental laws, like getting caught lying.

Let’s put the 1960s average unbelieving person in America at an 8 in their faith walk. They’re not here yet, but they are not real far away.



Compare that to the average unbelieving American today.



In your life time this is how much the culture has changed. In today’s world, the “average” unbelieving person in America does not know:

- x the basics of the Christian faith, including the deity of Jesus.
- x absolute truth exists, and the Bible is trustworthy.
- x or see, the Church, Christians, and Christian leaders in a favorable way.
- x or have a positive experience of church in their own personal life background. In fact they may not have any experience with church of any kind.
- x they do not experience a sense of guilt when braking fundamental laws, like getting caught lying.<sup>9</sup>

9 **Jeremiah 6:15** – ... they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush....

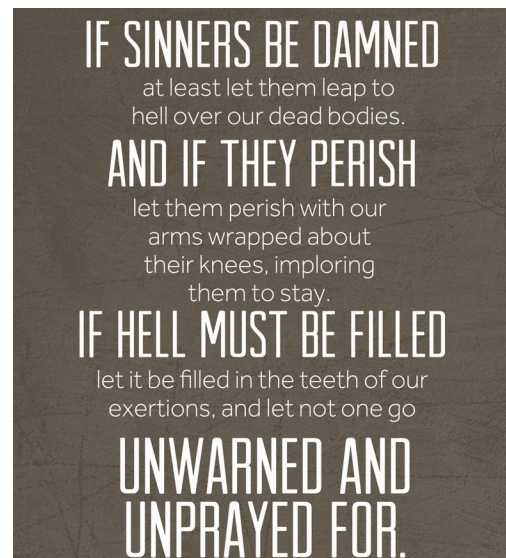
Why do we need to change? Because the things that worked just a few years ago: friendship Sunday, congregational evangelistic campaigns, invitations to Christmas Eve worship, or to Bible study at church, don't work like they used to. In fact the way Homiletics (that is preaching) is generally taught remains utterly out of touch with the way we need to reach the culture of today.

Churches keep acting like the world is full of 7s, 8s, 9s. The problem is the world has become full of 1s, 2s, and 3s. Today, for the most part, it takes far more personally invested time. Evangelism and outreach requires a relationship through which the Word can be brought to people's ears. That means it takes longer, and it takes a one-on-one personal investment. It requires the people of a congregation to demonstrate integrity, valor, honor, honesty and Christian love over the long haul, because there is a longer journey to get across the scale to a "10" and we are starting with people who have a general mistrust of the Church.

Like I've said, we're headed for change. Change can be challenging, even a little scary. (It really isn't that bad.) This month I've got a challenge for you. Read the book of Acts this month. There is a lot going on in that book, but I want you to focus on the relationships, and how the Spirit used those relationships to bring people the Word through which people were brought to faith. Write down what you think needs to change at St. John's so we can become become a relational, missional, and radically hospitable church.

The fire alarm is ringing for the lost. Let's ensure we've done our part to fulfill Christ's command.<sup>10</sup> Let's work toward God's goal to get them all home.<sup>11</sup> Let none fail to get there<sup>12</sup> unwarned and unprayed for.

The year 2030 doesn't look pretty and it's approaching fast. This is the most difficult challenge we will have as a church. We must change. We need to become a discipling church. We need to see people outside the Church, not as refuse, but as a treasure trove of friends not yet



10 **Matthew 28:19-20** – Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

11 **1 Timothy 2:3-4** – This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

12 **Matthew 22:13** – Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

met. We need to reinvigorate our hearts by having God bring us into His greater story, not by us trying to find a place where God fits into ours.<sup>13</sup>

We can do this, and should do this, in Jesus' name.

Amen.



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

13 For more on this see my message: 09/13 - Romans 9:1-13 - "We are People of the Promise." From the God's Greater Story series.