

Mark 4:26-34

June 16, 2024

This is not *your* church. I understand that many of you have been baptized and married here, you've been sitting in these pews for decades faithfully listening to God's voice in this building, you've dedicated countless hours, dollars, prayers, services, materials into this church, and that's a beautiful, God-pleasing thing. And I'm sure when you talk to your friends and neighbors you refer to St. John's as your church, and that's great, but please understand, this is not *your* church. It's also not *my* church. You may have called me to be the spiritual leader here, I may dedicate 45, 50, 55, 60 hours a week to this church, I may have preached every Sunday in this church for the past 11 months, I may teach all the Bible Studies, Confirmation, Bible Information Class, I may do the baptisms, visit shut ins, pray for the members, counsel the members, admonish and encourage the members, I may even refer to this church as "my church" when I invite people to come worship, but this is not *my* church. This is not *our church*. It doesn't belong to *us*. It belongs to Jesus. It's his. Jesus is the one who willingly gave his life as the offering that makes you and I perfect, he is the one who claims us as his own when we are brought to believe in him, and everyone who believes in him in the world, that's THE Church. It's his. And we, St. John's Lutheran Church, are a small part of the greater, grander Church, and we as a congregation have been given each other, this church, as a gift from Jesus **Because Jesus is the Lord of the Church**. And today, in two simple pictures, Jesus wants to show you **1. The Mystery of the Church** and the **2. Majesty of the Church**.

1. The Mystery of the Church. Right in the first part of Mark's Gospel, we saw the first thing Jesus did was go and preach a simple message to people, "The Kingdom of God is near!" But he never really defines or talks about the "Kingdom of God" until about chapter 4, and he never gives a simple definition of the "Kingdom of God," but instead gives a variety of pictures and teachings about the Kingdom of God. If I had to give a short definition, I'd say it's wherever Jesus reigns- specifically- the hearts of the people that know him and trust him. It's the Church- God's people all over the world, that's his Kingdom, and Jesus uses two pictures here to teach us about the Kingdom, the Church: the first one is this: a farmer planting seeds. Here's the idea, and you guys that worked in agriculture and you gardeners know this better than anyone. The most important thing for you to do is plant seeds, water the seeds, and then there really isn't much more for you to do. Plant, water, and enjoy the harvest. It's not necessarily your job to try to fix the seed or make the seed more effective than it already is, it's not your job to lose sleep over whether or not the seed is going to produce- you can't control that, your job is to plant the seed, and the rest is somewhat of a mystery that will unfold and all you can do is go about your day and wait for the seed to do what it does. That, according to Jesus, is what the Church is like.

So, what's he saying? In these types of pictures, the seed is the message of the Gospel- Jesus crucified for your sins, and to sow the seed is to tell people about Jesus. That is our job as a church, and everything we do must ultimately come back to that. From my estimation, there are two major ways that Christians get this wrong- and I'll be the first one to repent. One temptation that pastors and

churches often fall into is thinking that if they just have the right kind of sermons, the right kind of programs, the right kind of facilities, the right kind of people, the right kind of governance, the right kind of pastor, then that's going to make things work and people will flood in and we'll be able to pat ourselves on the back. I'll be the first one to repent of thinking that if I do a good enough job, I can get people to come to Jesus and I'll get to share in the credit. When I think that way, I'm wrong. That's not what Jesus says. We are responsible for sharing and sowing the seed, not making the plant grow. Our job is to be in the word, share the word, and what happens then is up to God, and if people come to Jesus, we don't get the credit, we simply enjoy the harvest. The other way churches and pastors get this wrong is by forgetting the whole point of the church in the first place: spread the seed. How do we spend our money? How do we govern our congregation? How do we do worship? How do we decorate? Which organizations and activities and ideas should we go forward with, which ones should we pivot away from? Every decision, every conversation needs to revolve around this question: How will this affect the sharing of the Gospel? That's what it's all about.

This is important for us to think about, especially because in our town we have one specific group that we are called to sow the seed to: college students- specifically, the college students who are in our WELS fellowship and the ones that aren't, but are willing to hear the Gospel from us. That's one of our big fields that we need to be throwing seeds into, and here's something I find really exciting about that specific mission field. It's a mission field that enables the harvest to turn into sowers of the seed- because when the students graduate, they are going to be active Christians in the churches wherever they go and they are going to be a big part of the churches that spread and sow the seed, so our job as a congregation is not only to serve them, but to give them chances to serve alongside and to use and hone their gifts. That means allowing college students to lead us in worship music. That means allowing students to record and post services. That means allowing college students to take part in the ministry of St. John's. And that's not just a new, crazy idea from Pastor Schulz, that's a mandate from the Scriptures- equip God's people for acts of service, and we get to be a part of that. We get to partake and enjoy the mystery of the Church not only in the students, but in ourselves. The other important application from this parable is this: the key to unlocking the power of the mystery of the Church is reading and studying God's Word. When you read and study and think about God's Word, you don't simply learn more stuff- God changes you. He grows you into who he wants you to be- this is how he works. You need to sow the seed into your heart! And when you do that, you will grow. Read it, or listen to it in the car when you drive to work- the Bible gateway app is great for that. I dare you. I dare you to read or listen to the Bible for 20 minutes a day for a month and if, after that, you can honestly say it was a waste of your time, I'll stop hounding you. But it won't be. That's God's way of changing your life, and changing you.

2. The Majesty of the Church. Everything I said before about the mystery of the Church, the growth, the harvest, people coming to faith and you yourself changing by hearing God's voice, all of it requires sacrifice. In order for students to be involved in worship, you may have to sacrifice your specific preference for worship once in a while (not that often). If we involve students in our ministry at St.

John's, we may have to sacrifice a preference or two. If you want this church to continue to function without worrying about money, you may have to sacrifice an earthly comfort or two in order to give more to God. In order to read the Word and actually dedicate time to it, there may be things around the house that don't get done and 20 minutes of TV that you don't get to watch. Sacrifices are a part of this- I know what I am asking you. But here's the thing: according to Jesus, every sacrifice we make for the Church is absolutely, completely, beyond worth it. Because the Church is Majestic. Jesus is not just painting a cool picture when he says the Church is like a mustard seed. He's making a huge statement: "My Church may not look like much, but it is the most majestic thing in the world."

That's so true in so many ways. When Jesus was crucified, he didn't just "save" us, he put a price tag on us and gave us his own glory and beauty and perfection- so when God looks at his people, he is brought to tears with joy- he's proud to call you his own. The Church is majestic because of what Christ has done, but that's not all! Consider how the Gospel has worked wonders in and through the Church. The Christian church in Antioch was the first place where Christians were called Christians because it was racially diverse- because for the first time in history, a big group of people decided that their brothers and sisters were the ones connected by faith in Jesus, not blood- the Gospel did that. Can any of you name for me the historical base of Christianity- where Christianity has always thrived? No, because there isn't one. Jesus' church has spread and moved throughout all different parts of the world in a way no other religion ever has or will- think about this: each Sunday, we- mostly white Americans hear and meditate on the words of brown-skinned middle eastern men, and often I'll include the quotes of dark-skinned, African men, because some of the first most important, powerful Christian theologians like Augustine, Cyprian, Tertullian, Origen, came from Africa. And then the Gospel thrived in Northern Europe, moved to America, and now is thriving in South America, Sub-saharan Africa, and East Asia. That's the majesty of the church- it's filled with people from all over because its message is too good for just one culture. But not only that, the church's love for each other is majestic. Do you know how loved you are by your fellow Christians who don't know you? Every time I go to conferences, pastors, teachers, professors ask me, "How's Whitewater? How are they doing? How's the mission?" People are praying for you, that God would bless you and embolden you to invite your friends and family to know Jesus. Your brothers and sisters are eager to hear about what God has been doing for you and in you, and it brings me joy to tell them. It brings me joy to tell them about how we had twice adult confirmations as youth confirmations, and the year's only half over and we have two more in the process! It brings me joy to tell them about our dedicated Sunday School teachers, about our UWW employees that make it so we can do Campus Ministry well, and about the leadership here who want to share the Gospel and serve and are willing to sacrifice their time and energy so the seed can be sown, and all the sacrifices that people are willing to make because they love and cherish the seed of the Gospel. I tell them about the people in Bible class and the insights I get from them, and the way our people love and pray for and respect me as their pastor and how I couldn't ask for a more wonderful congregation. That's not just nice. That's majestic, and it's something that Jesus produces through his life-saving Gospel. So, my friends, let's sacrifice- for each other, and for the seed of the Gospel- it will always be worth it. Amen.