

“The Secret of Church Growth”

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

June 17, 2018

4th Sunday After Pentecost

We live in a pretty confident (some would call it arrogant) society. We truly believe that we have the ability to fix any situation. If there is any question, we can always find the answer. If there is any trouble, we can always find a solution. All we have to do is gather all of the pertinent information, analyze such information, and devise the right course of action. If we do that, there is no problem we can't solve. We apply this way of thinking to education, business, sports, global warming, and so on. It was only a matter of time before such thinking was applied to the church.

What do I mean by that? In almost every area of our lives, success is measured in statistics which are easily quantifiable: the number of A's you get on your report card; the number of homeruns you hit in baseball, the amount of money your business brings in, and so on. When these numbers are up, you are considered a success. However, when these numbers are down, you are automatically assumed to have a problem which needs solving and a new plan which needs to be implemented.

Many people today think the Christian church is in trouble. In many congregations and in the Church as a whole, numbers are down in such vital areas as names on membership rolls, bodies in the pews, dollars in the offering plate, and volunteers for boards and committees. According to the stats, the Church is in crisis.

Christians are worried and afraid. They worry about the viability of their particular congregation or denomination and they fear for the future of the Christian church as a whole. This leads denominational officials, clergy & theologians, and even the ordinary Christians sitting in the pew to ask two questions. First, how do we make the church grow? Second, how do we solve the problem of small churches?

Back in the late 70s, I took a course at the seminary called “Church Growth.” The Church Growth Movement was the latest “in thing” in Christianity at the time and we, in the LCMS, had bought into it. This movement put forth the theory that, if we could accumulate the pertinent data about why and where some churches were growing; analyze that data intensely; and use that data to formulate a plan of action, we could make churches grow.

And who wouldn't want that? I think all Christians earnestly desire for God's church on earth to grow, both at a congregational level and in all the world. It may be for entirely altruistic reasons that we want growth, that is, we desire all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth as the Lord does. It may be more selfish reasons, that is, we are worried about having enough people and resources to maintain a congregation and a denomination. But all of us would like the church to grow. Combine that desire with the belief that we are able to solve any problem if we study it from a scientific and sociological point of view, and you have the Church Growth Movement.

In that class, we did a lot of studying of statistics, sociological trends, population shifts, and so on in order to find where, how, and why the church was growing. Little to no theology was involved in this and it was even claimed that this method could fit into any theology (which should have been a warning to us).

Some of the proposed solutions to helping the church grow were obvious and common sense. If your church had a clear sign identifying its location, advertised in the newspaper (today, “have an internet presence), had facilities that were well taken care of, both inside and outside, spacious parking lots, signs identifying where the restrooms are located, and friendly

greeters, then visitors were likely to come and return which could lead to growth in membership.

But there were more radical and often unproven assumptions that came from this movement. Your church will grow if you adapt or change your theology to fit the culture of your location. Your church will grow if you change your worship style to fit the musical tastes of your location. Your church will grow if you change its polity and not have so many boards and committees. The problem of small churches can be taken care of by closing such congregations in order to better utilize resources.

These conclusions often led to tragic results. Churches made serious changes in their confession of the faith and in the practice of their church simply for the sake of numbers and dollars. They may have had more members in the pews and more dollars in the bank, but there was serious doubt as to whether they were making a biblically pure confession of the faith anymore. What's worse, many church officials, intoxicated by growing numbers, didn't seem to care.

Secondly, there was an extraordinary amount of guilt laid on members and churches. Some felt guilty because they followed the recommendations of the church growth gurus and changed their confession and practice but did not experience any numerical growth. They felt they must have done something wrong. Others felt guilt because they did not follow the recommendations of those same gurus and, when growth did not occur, they were made to feel responsible for the lack of growth.

I know some of these same worries and fears exist among the leadership and the membership of Peace Lutheran Church. There has been the desire of and the search for the answer to the question of how our congregation can grow. There have been criticisms of changes made which have not produced growth in membership, attendance, or offerings. There has been guilt felt over lack of participation in some program, study, or workshop that surely would've led to growth if we had done it.

Such worry and fear is not a new issue in the Christian church. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus addresses these issues by telling stories called parables. What are parables? The traditional understanding of parables as "earthly stories with heavenly meanings" is a bit simplistic and not entirely helpful. Rather, parables compare the kingdom of God (or heaven) which was unknown to the people with everyday life activities which were known to the people. Parables do not talk about a place, either heaven or the Christian church. Rather, parables describe the rule or reign of God in His world. In other words, parables explain how God acts. The two short parables in our text for today describe how God acts concerning the beginning, growth, and expansion of His Church.

In the first parable, the question of how the Christian church grows is compared to how a field of crops grows. Jesus says that a farmer simply scatters seed on the ground. He goes about his daily tasks and doesn't lose sleep over it. The ground produces the crop by itself ("automatically" the text says), but the farmer doesn't know how it happens. He is there to sow the seed and to reap the harvest, but he doesn't cause the crop to grow.

The kingdom of God works in the same way. We sow the seed – which is the Word of God, specifically the message of salvation – and then we go about our daily tasks without losing sleep over it. The Word of God which has brought us to repentance over our sin; the Word of God which has brought us to faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior from sin; the Word of God which has brought us life and salvation – the Word of God likewise brings others to repentance, faith, and all the gifts which God has for his church. The kingdom of God – the

holy Christian church – was established, maintains, and grows by the working of the Word of God and nothing else.

This wording reminds me of Martin Luther's response to someone who praised him for bringing about the Reformation. Luther replied, "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

This is great good news for us for it frees us and comforts us as we concern ourselves with the establishment, the maintenance, and the growth of any Christian congregation or denomination, indeed with the whole Christian Church on earth. We do not have to worry about finding the correct method for making the church grow. There is none. There is no sociological, cultural, or scientific solution to church growth. We can learn from these disciplines, but they cannot formulate a plan that is infallible. We have to repent of our prideful assumption that we can find the way for the church to grow. Instead, we must admit that we don't know how or why the Church grows. And that's all right.

We are free to sow the Word of God and allow the Holy Spirit to use that Word to convert people to faith in Jesus Christ and grow the Christian church. We trust, not in the power of our plans, studies, and analysis, but solely in the power of the Word of God to work according to His time and according to His way. We are free from worrying about the question of, "how does the church grow?", because there is no answer to that question. We don't know how or why the Church grows in some places and not in others. So, we don't expend energy searching for the nonexistent answer.

Now, this is not an excuse for doing nothing, nor is it an excuse for not seeking to speak the word of God in the clearest and most loving way. This is comfort for us in knowing that we do not have to cause the growth of the church nor worry about whether the church will grow. It is God who causes the change. It is the Word of God which He uses to bring about that change. Do we pass up opportunities to share the Word of God? Sure. Do we mess up in the times we do share the Word of God? Most definitely. However, these sins are covered in the blood of Jesus Christ and therefore are forgiven by God who then renews us to go back and continue sowing the Word.

What about the size of the Church of God? In our love of size and statistics, many people look down their noses at small gatherings of God's people and pronounce them unworthy of existence. Many denominations, including our own LCMS, have advocated closing small congregations because they are drains upon the denomination's budget. This is an issue concerning us out here in Montana. While other district presidents have expressed their desire to close small congregations, President Forke has worked tirelessly to keep small congregations open. Why? Out of mere sentimentality? No.

Our Lord's second parable deals with this issue of size. While we measure things by numbers and size, God does not. Our society and culture views as successful only those organizations which are big in people, dollars, and size. We, in the Christian church, have adapted that view as well. But our Lord sees this differently. Jesus says the kingdom of God "is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth." Jesus does not measure success or value in terms of size. The Church of Jesus Christ has almost always been one of the smallest and least successful organizations in the world. And that's all right.

However, size can surprise us. Smallness is not always a perpetual condition. It can change. Of the mustard seed, Jesus says, "yet when it (the mustard seed) is sown it grows up

and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” What God has done with the tiny mustard seed, He is also doing with His Church.

Therefore, no gathering together of Christians, no matter how small, is worthless or of no importance in the kingdom of God. The Church of God, this smallest of groups, which began with 11 frightened men and a few frightened followers locked together in an upper room fearing for their lives, grew. Through the continued speaking, teaching, and preaching of the Word of God and the right use of the Sacraments – Holy Baptism & the Lord’s Supper – this smallest of organizations, has grown to be enormous in size throughout the centuries. It has become so big that it is no longer limited to God’s chosen people, the Jews. Rather, people from all nations have, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, come to the kingdom of God.

In the Christian Church, we never worry about size. Jesus reminds us that He is present, even when there is but two or three gathered together in His name. No matter how small or weak the Church appears to be, Jesus promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. God will provide growth where and when He will through the planting of the seed of the Word of God as it is proclaimed, taught, preached, given in the water of Holy Baptism and the bread & wine of the Lords Supper.

Again, this is not an excuse to keep the church small because we like our congregation close and cozy like it always was or to be irresponsible with our use of resources in carrying out the Lord’s Commission. It is a comfort to know that the size of the church does not make a difference with God and will never completely be stomped out, no matter how bad things get to be.

The Christian Church is not against study or learning, even when it comes to carrying out our ministry together. We can learn much by studying the world around us. However, we dare not shape our theology by our study of sociology, nor decide our course of action by the results of surveys and polls. It is really quite simple. We continue to share the Word of God – the Law which reveals our sin condemns us and the Gospel which forgives us our sins and saves us from sin, death, and hell – with everyone we meet in every opportunity which God provides. Having done this, like Luther and Melanchthon, we sleep peacefully, imbibing our favorite beverage, and trusting God’s divine power to work through that Word and His divine mercy to change people’s hearts and grow the Kingdom. To paraphrase Luther, “We do nothing, but the Word does everything.” That’s the secret of church growth. Amen.