

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Sermon

I Will Build My Church

Matthew 16:13-18
Chapel Sermon by Rev. William Utech

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Goal: that the hearers believe more firmly that Jesus uses them to build His church.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“I will build my church,” Jesus says. And from my rather short, yet very intense time as a Mission Executive, I’ve learned that we leaders in the church typically hear those words in one of two ways. Jesus promises, “I will build my church,” and we hear that as freedom FROM God’s Mission, or we hear that as freedom FOR God’s Mission.

Those who hear it as freedom FROM God’s Mission think, “Great! Jesus is promising to do it all! I’ll preach the pure Word and correctly administer the Sacraments and if anything good comes from it, it will be ALL His doing! It’s His promise, it’s His Mission, it’s His responsibility, there’s nothing left for me to do . . .”

Those who hear these words as freedom FOR God’s Mission think, “Great, I have been blessed with significance! I get to make a difference in eternal matters! I will invest the best I have in this promise, in this Mission, in my Heavenly Father’s family business, and if anything good comes from it, it will be ALL His doing! It’s His promise, it’s His Mission, and WOOT! WOOT! I get to play a part in it!”

“I will build my church,” Jesus says. How do you hear those words?

Tom Brown was born to be a church planter. After successfully planting one new congregation in Ham Lake, MN and another in Chaska, MN, he was called by



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one of our Minnesota South congregations to plant a brand-new congregation in St. Peter, MN—a community in which there is no LCMS presence whatsoever.

St. Peter is also the home of Gustavus Adolphus College, a large ELCA university that currently has an enrollment of almost 2,500 undergraduates. Gustavus Adolphus is the primary employer in St. Peter, MN, which has a population of only around 11,500.

St. Peter, much like Gustavus Adolphus itself, is outspokenly liberal in just about every way you can imagine, especially when it comes to the trendy topics. In this place, if you're not in favor of the newest, most non-traditional views of marriage, family, gender roles, and the like, you're simply not going to be a player in the community. Ever since my first visit to St. Peter, I could not shake the impression that a dark spiritual pall hung over that city and that it was a good thing that we were working to plant a truly confessional congregation in that place.

Then the problems started. . . The new church (that took the name River of Life Lutheran) started as a Bible study meeting in Tom's home. It soon outgrew that venue, however, and needed to find a larger space. Tom went to the area public schools, like many church planters will do, and asked if his new congregation could rent space there. Every single public school in St. Peter either refused to rent him room, or offered space to do so at such a ridiculously high rent that it made it impractical for the new congregation to sign a lease.

Tom went to the president of Gustavus Adolphus and asked if the new congregation could rent space there. The President told him no—twice! He said that Tom and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod were too narrow in matters of doctrine and practice to “fit” on that campus.

Tom finally found a place—a local museum—that would let him and River of Life in their back room. It was a space that could hold up to 60 people, and in six months, River of Life outgrew it. Also, in that time, the original deal for renting that facility shot from \$50 per week to \$500 per week.

But Tom is a church planter. He has a heart for lost people and a heart for the St. Peter community. And he's creative! One of the members of his congregation owns a flower shop, and so what did Tom do? He volunteered his time at the flower shop the entire week before Valentine's Day. Hundreds of people entered and exited that shop throughout the course of that week, and Tom met them all! And his new church continued to grow. Now they were up to 70 in worship and had hit a ceiling of sorts. There was no space in that town that they could afford to rent! No place for them to go!

But Tom is a church planter, and in his moving about the community he had gotten to know the young lady who was the director of the local Good Samaritan

retirement community. He offered to be a chaplain for anybody in that facility that ever needed a pastor. Tom and this woman got to know, like, and trust each other.

Next door to this Good Samaritan retirement community sat a Good Samaritan forty-bed nursing home on seven acres of land. Good Samaritan was getting out of the nursing home business in St. Peter and was in the process of relocating the residents in that facility. The woman at the retirement center knew the building and lot would soon be going on sale; and so, all on her own, she contacted the Good Samaritan home office in Iowa and told them about Tom and about River of Life.

A month or so later, Tom got a phone call from the man who manages all of Good Samaritan's properties. He said he had heard about River of Life's need for a building. He said that the nursing home and the property it sat on had an assessed value of \$1.6 million. He said he would sell it to Tom for \$800,000. Tom gulped and then called me. I gulped too! It was being offered to us at well below market value, but there's no way we could saddle a new church of 70 people with an \$800,000 mortgage and the upkeep and maintenance of a large building! We had to tell the man, "Thanks, but no thanks."

River of Life continued to limp along over the next number weeks, but because they had no space, they pretty much stopped growing. They were becoming disheartened and were beginning to lose momentum. Out of the blue, the Good Samaritan man phoned up Tom once again. He was willing to sell the building and lot to us for \$300,000. Tom and I gulped in unison. This was something we had to pay attention to! So we called a meeting of members from the Minnesota South Missions Committee and Finance Committee and for three straight hours we pro-d and con-d this proposal half to death and in the end, I believe, consecrated common sense reigned. Even though it was tempting, there was no way we could saddle a congregation of 70 souls with a \$300,000 mortgage.

Tom is a church planter. His heart was broken by this decision. He knew that if he didn't find space for River of Life to meet in soon the opportunity for the congregation to grow and flourish in that community would soon pass. So upset was he that he came to my next Missions Committee meeting and poured his heart out. Distraught over the idea of having to fold up the mission church and walk away, he stuck around after the meeting. That's when he and I and another colleague sat down, closed the office door, held hands and prayed that God would make a way for River of Life. We were all at our wits end. There were no next steps. There was no Plan B.

And then Tom got into his car and headed back to St. Peter. Twenty minutes later, I walked out of my office to see Tom Braun sitting in our waiting area. "What are you doing back here?" I asked. "If you want to pray some more, that's fine, but I think God heard us the first time."

Tom said, “You need to sit down and listen to this.” With that, he opened up and played a voicemail message that he had on his cell phone. It was the Good Samaritan property guy from Iowa. The Good Samaritan Board had just met and had decided to give the nursing home property in St. Peter to the Minnesota South District and River of Life Lutheran Church.

Two months later, River of Life held its first public worship service in its new building. One hundred seventy-five people showed up. The picture below is a picture from that event. It’s captioned, “Jesus is building His church,” and that’s exactly what is happening.

Brothers and sisters, Tom is a church planter, and God used him to do this! Seeing this, knowing the full story behind it, having been personally involved in it, I am reminded that we are never, ever, in mission alone. Rather the Savior, who saves us from sin and secures our place as sons and daughters of the King, is the same Savior who honors us and blesses us by including us in the Family business of building His church. He used a church planter named Tom to do this. He will use you too.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Jesus is building His church