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Sermon

The Father's Heart

Specific Ministry Pastor Program Call Service Sermon by Todd Jones

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO
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There has been a great deal of discouraging talk about the church in North America. The ominous shadow of statistics has cast the pall of doubt. We know that less than 20¹ of people in any given community in the U. S. are in church on any given Sunday. That number drops dramatically if we consider only those under the age 35.² All major denominations are reporting declines in membership.³

In the state of the Synod report, it was reported again that the congregations of our denomination have experienced a decrease in membership, a decrease in baptisms, and a decrease in adult confirmations. It is estimated by some districts that as many as two-third of their congregations will have fewer than 75 in worship services in the next five years.

It has become very discouraging for many.

- Some justify the decline by saying we choose faithfulness over fruitfulness.
- Some call for our members to have more babies.



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These common responses to the “crises” on the church in North America reveal an incredible ignorance of our heavenly Father’s heart. Yes, we sing, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” We even, though at times grudgingly, acknowledge that God loves the people in the pews around us. He even loves that annoying person who tends to sing a little off key or the person who complains just a little too loudly in the church. After all, we all have issues. What seems to be missing for many is an awareness that our Father is crazy in love with all people.

We see the people of the world as the enemy, the problem. If they are not trying to kill us, they are trying to bend our theology so that we might be ripped from the loving arms of faith. They call us names. They mock our beliefs. They do not respect our traditions, like Sunday morning worship or Wednesday evening confirmation. They are attacking the institution of marriage. They are challenging gender identities.

And there is truth in the perception; there is an increase in anger and hatred for Christianity in North America. There are attempts to force us to compromise on the truth so that our message might be more palatable to the culture.

However, the people of the world look very different when viewed through the Father’s eyes. As when Jesus quoted Is. 61:1, He reveals the Father’s heart for the lost:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners (Lk 4:18).

Our heavenly Father is like a parent anxious to rescue a child that has been taken captive. God sees the people of this world as they truly are, captives, living a dismal life that will end in eternal darkness if they are not rescued.

The concept of captives as used in Scripture can be helpful. You see, one might be a captive because of foolish choices made. One might be a captive because of a crime that was committed. However, the captives described in Isaiah refer to those taken captive by a conquering force. They are more closely aligned with kidnapped victims than convicted convicts.

A young boy was kidnapped in a neighboring town from my first parish. Search parties were immediately organized. Everyone searched the ditches, searched the fields, searched the quarries, searched the wind breaks, the farm out-buildings, and even the cabins that were vacated at the close of the season. He was not found. A few months after the kidnapping, the pastors in our town gathered for the National Day of Prayer breakfast. The boy’s mother was the keynote speaker.

I happened to sit across from her, and we only had a brief chance to speak. After I shared the concern of my congregation and assured her of our prayers and commitment to help find her son, I shared my fears for my children. I told her that I

couldn't imagine the anxiety of not knowing where my child might be. She responded something to the effect, "I have trouble getting to sleep at night. I wake early in the morning. All I can think about is my child in the hands of an evil man." Her words describe our heavenly Father's heart.

The people of this world are God's children. They have been abducted by the enemy. As with any parent who has lost a child due to kidnapping, the Father has launched an all-out search and rescue operation. He will not stop until every last one of His lost ones has been freed. He has invited us to join in the mission and share in joy that accompanies the release of the captives. This rescue operation is why we exist. This rescue operation is priority number one for God.

Peter tells us about the Father's heart (2 Pt 3:9): "He is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Paul spurred on Timothy (1 Tim 2:4-5) to do the work of an evangelist saying, "God wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Paul adds that Jesus "came to give himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Tim 2:6).

In response to the decline of the church in North America, some have retreated into their theological fortress and claimed, "We have chosen faithfulness, that is why we are not fruitful." But how can we be faithful to the truth when we fail to be faithful to God's call to seek and save the lost? Some have responded to the decline by suggesting that the church needs to have more babies. It may be true that babies bring life into the church. However, it is not an answer. It ignores the Father's anguish over the billions of His children in captivity today. We cannot turn from them and focus on procreation. The mission field is ripe; Jesus mourned over the lost children and said, "Pray to the Lord of the harvest for more workers" (Mt 9:38).

I want to challenge all of you to consider your call to the church. No doubt there are many who have felt the call into ministry but have not answered the call because they question the viability of the church. Many are discussing the possibility that in the near future there will not be opportunities for pastors to serve the church and earn a living in the church. Some have questioned whether we need churches at all. No doubt, there will be many congregations that will close in the coming years. Economic factors and an aging membership will hit many churches hard.

Perhaps part of the problem is the confusion we have about the call to public ministry. No doubt men and women who receive a call from a congregation, are called to the public ministry by the congregation, but the call is not just to the congregation, it is to the kingdom of God. Our call is a call to those being held captive in sin, as much as it is a call to the gathered, the redeemed.

I'm not sure we have always thought through the image of "shepherds" under Christ. The shepherd is not the owner. The shepherd is the one who cares for the flock; he manages the flock. Now the owner does not keep the sheep as pets. The owner does not keep the flock because they make a beautiful statement on his front

lawn. The owner hopes to see profit through the flock. As shepherds, it is our call to tend the flock so that it might be productive.

We've already talked about the productivity that God desires to see in His flock, the saving of souls. Our call into the ministry is a call to the congregation to remind them that God's heart is for His children who remain captive in sin. Our call is to work alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ as we share the Gospel, which is the power of salvation. In short, our call is above all a call to serve the kingdom of God, by serving the congregations and ministries to which we are being called.

C. F. W. Walther preached the opening sermon at the first convention of the Synod. He began his sermon by recognizing that the unity that was achieved by the various church bodies coming together as one synod was the result of a great deal of debate and fighting. He pondered how the new church body could find unity in the wake of the divisions. He asserted in the sermon that true unity could only be found in the saving of souls. He asks, "What would happen if we really would make the saving of souls the ultimate purpose, the end and aim of our joint work?," and posits,

What an influence. . . upon our dear congregations and their ministers, and on their relationship to each other, if all acknowledge the salvation of souls as the one chief object of our joint labor. Then they will all work together peacefully and industriously. Even if controversies of all kinds should arise, the question: What serves best for the saving of souls? will then always give the right solution.⁴

Walther outlined three benefits of being a church body that focuses on saving of souls. He said that we would keep our doctrine pure because we cannot save souls through false doctrine. We would not get caught up in the egotism of building a kingdom for ourselves. We would not become discouraged if our congregation should not grow as we would like, because souls were still being saved by the church at large.

The church body was small. There were not a great number of Lutherans to collect. The German-speaking population was not the majority population by far. Walther could have pointed out those facts and opened the convention with a call to consolidate their efforts in a few mission endeavors while minimizing the risk to the church. He did not. Because the Father's heart is for His lost children, Walther called for the scattering of the shepherds and the flock so that they might be more effective in the chief work of the church, the saving of souls. Mike Newman, in his book, *Gospel DNA*, reminds us that what followed was an unprecedented church planting movement with the LCMS planting an average of one church a week for the first one hundred years of its history.⁵

The growing number of people not attending church or identifying as people having no religion, called the "nones" in our culture in North America, argue for the need to start more churches and increase the mission focus of existing churches. The

desperation and difficulties of this age underline the truth that though our life may be challenging, and we may struggle in the hardship of this world, we have been called to a noble task. We have been called to bring home the captives, to place the frightened and abused child into the arms of our loving heavenly Father, and to share in the joy of our heavenly Father, who says, “My child was lost, now he is found, come let us feast.”

My prayer is that that joy be multiplied among you as you answer God’s call to be servants of the Word—shepherds, pastors and deaconess, under Christ. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#attend

² Author’s results obtained using Missioninsite to analyze 2016 population percentages for the U. S. filtered by age, <http://missioninsite.com/>.

³ <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

⁴ Walther, C. F. W. (1872). Opening Sermon. *Lutheran Standard*. 30:19

⁵ M. W. Newman, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church*. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 37.