

Theme: Looking back for the future of our mission

I. Imitating Jesus

II. Led by Jesus

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

Matthew 9:35-38 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. **36** But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. **37** Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. **38** "Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Harvest, dear fellow redeemed:

1.21 gigawatts of electricity. Perhaps this statement sounds familiar to some of you. It comes from the movie: *Back to the Future*, a late 1980's production about a high school kid and his adventures with a time machine. In this movie the main character must go back into the past in order to shape the future. I always thought that *Back to the Future* was an interesting name. How could someone go *back* to the *future*? It's a hard concept for us to wrap our minds around because we look at the future as in front of us, not behind. But when you're traveling in time, it's possible to get so far ahead, that you need to go back to get to the future.

And as I think about the name of that movie, it seems that we're doing a similar thing during the 50th anniversary of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. We're not traveling in time nor are we trying to change the future, and our ministry is powered by Christ and His gospel, not electricity. But what we are doing is looking back *for* the future. Plug in what you want next to future: the future of our synod, the future of our children, the future of our congregation, the future of ILC. But most importantly it's Who we look back to. We don't look back to the founding fathers and families of the CLC, nor do we look back to the various controversies and teachings which have so vigorously shaped us. We look back to the only One worth looking back to, Jesus Christ, our Savior from sin. And as we contemplate so many blessings in 50 years as a synod, let us not forget nor neglect; but look back for the future of a most precious gift from the Lord, our mission to spread the gospel. May the Holy Spirit bless our meditation as we consider the future of our mission work, looking back to Jesus for the ultimate example and for guidance.

One of the most difficult aspects of mission work is knowing that there is such strong opposition to God's word out in the world. Take, for example, a story from my days in college at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. In my last year I was taking a class that looked at basic issues among the religions of the world. As one might expect, the topic of creation vs. evolution was thoroughly discussed. My professor showed us a newspaper article from a few years ago in which a public school teacher addressed the creation vs. evolution debate. The teacher was introducing creation as a possible alternative to evolution, which is taught in all public schools as fact. He wasn't advocating that creation was correct or even suggesting that the kids should believe it, even though we know this is the truth. He simply was stating that there are a group of people who believe in creation and not evolution, and he thought that the kids should be able to choose which one they wanted to believe. Well, it didn't take long for the school board to put an end to this and officially state that this teacher could not even introduce creation as a possible alternative to evolution, even though he still taught evolution and not creation. People, by nature, are so opposed to the Bible that they don't even want it mentioned in public or private. The very thought of God's word turns the sinful flesh the wrong way. And why should this surprise us? The old man in all of us is indeed one of the great enemies of our faith. If this teacher, who wasn't even professing God's word, is put away so quickly for a religious thought, then how can we accomplish anything in our mission work?

Or I could tell you about my canvassing experiences this summer. For those who don't know what canvassing is, it's going house to house, knocking on people's doors, and talking to them about Jesus, the Bible, and

church. Even though all I want to tell them is that God loves them enough to send His only Son to die for their sins, and as a result everyone has the free gift of eternal life, most people try to shoo you off as quickly as they can or occasionally they will just slam the door in your face.

Although stories like this are discouraging to us we shouldn't let them keep us from sharing the good news. People don't like hearing that they can't do it on their own, they don't want us to tell them that they aren't perfect in God's eyes and that Jesus had to come and rescue them. When people reject the gospel, they focus too much on themselves, and their inability to keep the law of God. But what they need to hear focuses alone on what Jesus has done, how He has already taken care of their problems, especially sin, and how He loves all. But as hard as we may try to tell people about this, some, maybe even most, are still going to reject it. This is the way it has been since sin first crept into the world: man is resistant to the truth.

Consider the rejection that Isaiah faced when he asked God, "Lord, who has believed our report?" Or when Zechariah likened the peoples' hearts to a piece of flint, hardened in unbelief (Zech. 7:12). We are reminded of Elijah when he fled to a cave to escape from the wicked queen Jezebel. He was the one remaining prophet of the LORD left in Israel and the people were seeking to kill him as they had the others. But what did God say to Elijah as he was cowering, alone and scared? He asked Elijah: "What are you doing here? Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD!" We shouldn't hide or be ashamed of the truth; but rather joyfully proclaim it and trust in the LORD. Yes, it is no mystery that wherever God's word is preached, rejection of it will follow. But that should only strengthen our resolve to continue to fight, to stand for the truth and proudly proclaim it.

And so as we *look back* to the state of mankind since the fall and as we *look back* to the prophets for encouragement in the face of rejection, let us also *look back* to Jesus as the ultimate example for us to imitate in our mission work.

Jesus was constantly surrounded by people during His time on earth. Simply put, the Savior had very little time to Himself, which is certainly the way He wanted it to be. But think of what it must have been like for Him from day-to-day. He had very little time for personal meditation or reflection, let alone time for rest. And think of the people who came to Him: the poor, sick, and despised of the earth; sinners and outcasts, and especially many who opposed Him. Without a doubt these all could be characterized as "*sheep without a shepherd*." Not only did Jesus concern Himself with helping those in affliction, He also had to constantly be on the guard against the attacks of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Through all of this though, Jesus continued His mission: preaching the word.

We are given a taste of that type of scenario at the beginning of our text: **v.35: Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.** What an amazing sight this must have been, no wonder that the fame of Jesus had spread throughout Israel and the surrounding regions. We may not think much when we read a verse like this, but consider how many single events could actually be packed into its words! Jesus went to all the centers of population, both large and small. He healed every sickness and every disease. We are reminded of the very last verse of John's gospel: **And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.**

The ministry of Jesus did not only contain the events recorded in the Scriptures, there were many more things which happened that we'll never know about this side of heaven. But what is clear is that Jesus was tireless in His mission work. He stopped at nothing and often put aside His own rest for the sake of those around Him. It didn't matter if Jesus was instructing His disciples, conversing with a Samaritan woman, comforting the thief on the cross, talking to Nicodemus, impressing the scribes as a child, or admonishing the Pharisees in the midst of rejection: He brought the same message: Sins forgiven in the Savior, confirmed in the word of God. For it was Jesus Who confirmed the truth of Scripture when He declared that it could not be broken. It was Jesus Who taught: **"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness..."** It was Jesus Who told the

adulterous woman, **“Go and sin no more,”** and to the paralyzed man, **“Son be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.”** It was Jesus Who promised, **“Today, you will be with me in Paradise.”** And it was Jesus Who commanded: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to everyone.”**

With no uncertainty we can learn a lesson from Jesus for both our personal and congregational mission work. Always have the mindset of spreading the gospel with the same love with which Jesus displayed for us when He paid for our sins. We shouldn't cater to some and leave others in the dark because of pre-conceived notions created by our flesh. Rather we should work tirelessly throughout our lives no matter who we may be talking to or what situation the Lord puts us in.

At times in our lives we tend to ask the question: “When do I stop bringing the gospel to someone who continues to reject it? When is enough enough? Is it when someone looks like they will reject it? Is it when someone says no to our face? Is it when their appearance is too shabby looking to come to church? Certainly not, may the Lord always keep us from such self-righteous attitudes. But what about when things really start to get heavy? What about when we are faced with the Pharisees of our day: the egotistical humanist, the staunch atheist, or the selfish abortionist? Even the ignorant heathen whose sole goal in life is to kill all Christians? Well, if we said enough to them then we just gave up on the Apostle Paul himself, before He walked that road to Damascus. You see, anytime we refuse or stop preaching God's word, we are forgetting about Who does the real work of conversion: The Holy Spirit.

Jesus promises to lead us today by sending us the Holy Spirit. What a great comfort it is to know that our task is not to convince or convert but rather to spread. The appeal of the message comes from the Spirit inspired truth of the word. We are simply the faucet through which the gospel flows. And led by Jesus' example, let us burst forth with that living water which quenches any thirst. Jesus gave the same promise to His apostles and disciples. He told them that they were going out to the ends of the earth but they wouldn't be going alone. Our job, like theirs, consists only of getting the word out into the world and letting the Holy Spirit do His work.

And so as we continue to look back for the future of our mission work, let us remember that we are led by Jesus. He points us in the right direction for beginning mission work, one thing that everyone can do: pray. We need to pray that the Lord would send workers out to spread the gospel, and not just that but that the Lord would enable His harvest. Earlier in Matthew Jesus gave His disciples a prayer worth praying: The Lord's Prayer. We are reminded of the 2nd petition of that prayer, *Your kingdom come*. But how often we simply repeat the words we know so often, without the thoughts coming from our heart.

One of my seminary professors gave me a helpful reminder about fixing this problem. Each time you pray the Lord's Prayer, think of a different wording for each petition. Thinking of the 2nd petition this way helps us understand that we aren't only praying for ourselves. We are also asking that God's kingdom comes to all people, to all who hear the gospel and have the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to enter their hearts. What a great form of mission work! Praying that God would enable His harvest by leading others to faith. In the few seconds that it takes to ask that God's kingdom would come, we are asking that the Holy Spirit would reach out to an untold number of people! We can see why the hymnist wrote: *“Satan trembles when he sees the weakest Christian on his knees.”* This is because a Christian who prays to the Lord of the Harvest is a Christian who understands that power does not rest in himself, but comes from God.

And this power of God is founded firmly in that very work of Jesus, His crucifixion and resurrection, which have filled our hearts with the promise of deliverance from death, hell, and Satan. What a tremendous gift from our Lord, the security of knowing that we aren't sheep without a shepherd, that we know that heaven is where we are being led. But as you treasure that great feeling of sins forgiven, think also about all those whose hearts still have the emptiness of unbelief. Think of those who have not heard about their Savior from sin. What better response is there to such a gift of grace than to gladly share and proclaim it all the days of our life?

As we look back on the last 50 years, we can see how God has certainly enabled the harvest in our synod both home and abroad. He has graciously blessed our numbers with the addition of 68 congregations since 1962. He has given us the gift of two high schools, a college, and a seminary in which our young members can faithfully grow in the word. In the early 1970s He led one of our brethren from California to come into contact with a Nigerian pastor in Africa. As the man taught the pastor about the truth of the Bible, the Holy Spirit worked the miracle of conversion in his heart, and our missionary efforts to the continent of Africa took off. Later in 1981, the Lord led another one of our brethren to the country of India where he witnessed of Christ in a hospital of all places. This witness led the young man to come into contact with the headmaster of an Indian school for children who was looking for a Christian church. In addition to these contacts, missionary opportunities were also realized in the countries of: Thailand, Myanmar, and Nepal. Throughout all of this, the Lord has seen fit to bless our overseas membership to 4x more than our home membership. But the true gift of our mission efforts does not lie in the numbers of souls received into membership. It is rather based upon the simple fact that Jesus has allowed us to reach out to many people both near and far, with the promise of salvation.

And so, as we look back for the future of our mission, we see that we need to continue in the word of God. Sure, externals will change, buildings will come and go, membership may increase or decrease. But these things do not define who we are; they do not make up our purpose and aim in life. We heed the examples of those faithful warriors who have trod before us: the prophets, apostles, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and laymen. But most importantly, we imitate the example of our Savior, He who sanctifies us by the truth of His word and promise of salvation. The road before us is beset with questions and uncertainty. Will we face rejection? Yes. Will the task be easy? No. Will we struggle, become weary, or feel the pressing load of our failures? At times, yes. But for every opposition and question we come across, the Lord is there to guide us on. His compassion fails not, great is His faithfulness. Although we will have troubles and trials, our Lord Jesus guarantees us that His word will endure forever, the gospel will continue to be preached, and the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of men.

May we continue into our future the same way that we have been traveling these last 50 years: looking back to our Savior in His word. May we continue to pray to the Lord of the Harvest with an honest and sincere heart. Asking Him that He continue to send out faithful laborers into His harvest and that His kingdom would come to all people. And may we continue to imitate and be led by our Lord Jesus Christ in our daily mission. Amen

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 43:1-7

What a wonderful mission we have from the LORD to spread the good news of salvation to others! We are truly blessed to be able to share the beautiful thoughts that Isaiah describes in these verses. There is indeed no limit to the LORD's graciousness, it spans from the east to the west. Most importantly, the LORD has redeemed His people, He has paid sin's ransom with His own blood. With that work accomplished believers certainly have reason to fear no evil.

Acts 16: 9-15

It's amazing how God is able to use us to spread the gospel! Just when it looked like Paul's mission had hit a dead end when the Spirit told them not to go into Asia, he receives a vision from a Macedonian man. This vision leads Paul to cross the Aegean Sea into Macedonia where many new contacts are reached. A strong reminder that we need only to follow the word and not always be worried about what we think is best.

Welcome

We welcome all this morning and pray that your comfort and hope of sins forgiven in Christ Jesus has been strengthened by God's word. As a result, may you continue to spread that message to others so that they too may have the assurance of salvation that comes from the knowledge of the truth. Please sign our guest book

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in the entry way if you are a visitor and we hope that you will be able to join us again. If you have questions about our church or about the message you heard today, please feel free to talk to Pastor Bernthal. May the LORD continue to shower rich blessings upon you all!

Hymns

Opening: 511

Before Sermon: 413

Offering: 789 vv. 1-3

After Prayer: 770

After Benediction: 427 vv.1,3,7