

A Visioning Retreat: We Are The Joyful Sign

Our Vision That All May Be Fed

Nurtured in Word and Sacrament, God sends us to become a joyful sign of God's abundant blessing as we:

- proclaim the good news of Jesus to every hungry soul,
- share compassion with all who suffer, and
- feed all whose bodies lack nourishment.

Core Values

prayer, human dignity, gratitude, the neighbor, grace

We commit ourselves to:

- pray without ceasing,
- respect the sacred dignity of every human being,
- cultivate a deep sense of gratitude to God, the giver of all good things,
- seek out and befriend the neighbor,
- remain humble in the conviction that our calling comes purely by the grace of God.

Explanation of this Resource:

This resource is intended for use over four one-hour meetings of leadership or at a retreat dedicated to imagining the ways in which your congregation may live into and fully implement our vision: “That All May Be Fed”

Needed:

- Enough large seeds for everyone (try corn)
- White board, newsprint or other way to write and display text
- Bibles and writing utensils
- Access to the online resources “The Missional Toolbox of the South Dakota Synod”

Opening Prayer

Lord let our hearts be good soil, open to the seed of your word. Open our eyes to see where you are sending us to be your embodied word planted in the soil of our world. As the seed is crushed to make our bread, so make us a blessing of life and a nourishing presence in the lives of our neighbors, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and brother. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- Think of a time of planting seeds that stands out in your mind - when you planted seeds, as a child and/or in your vocation as a farmer, or gardener. What feelings did you have as you planted? How did it go? Were there setbacks, frustrations? Anyone care to share what you thought of?
- Take a seed into your hand and keep it throughout the Bible Study. What do you notice about it? How do these words apply to a seed?
 - Inert/Dead
 - Alive
 - Vulnerable
 - Tough
 - Hopeless
 - Hopeful
 - Incomplete
 - Complete
 - Doubtful
 - Potential
 - Strong
 - Weak
- How is it that these totally opposite words can apply to the same thing?
- Do some of these same opposites apply to you? Your church? How so?

Focus Text: Mark 4:26-29

The Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.
²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

Engaging the Text

Introduction

Q. – Tell us about a tree or plant you have seen growing in an unlikely place or against all odds.

Q. – How do you think people come to believe and trust in Jesus?

Have you ever wondered, “Why is it that some people hear the word of God and believe while others hear the same word and do not believe?” Or perhaps you have asked, “How is it that ANYONE comes to believe such an outrageous story!?” Maybe you have wondered, “What is my role in this unfolding drama of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ?” “What is God doing in my church and my community to bring people to faith in Jesus?”

Dear Leader: invite answers from the group, not everyone needs to answer every question, but work hard to insure that everyone is invited to share something at some point.

The seed that is both/and

Read Mark 1:1

Q. – Mark has committed a grammatical error. Do you see it?

Q. – In what ways does this sentence fragment contain the “DNA” of this story?

Q. – Consider the seed in your hand. In what ways is the seed in your hand like this opening sentence of Mark’s Gospel? OR - How is this way of beginning like the way a plant begins from a seed?

The Gospel according to St. Mark begins with this fragment of a sentence – “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It is incomplete (like a seed), but (like a seed) it contains everything we need to know about Jesus: this news is good – Jesus is the Messiah, and he is God’s Son. That’s the “DNA” of the story. It is unlikely that Mark would accidentally start with an incomplete sentence. In literature there is a name for an incomplete sentence at the beginning of a story that contains much of what you need to know: it is called the “title.” If this is the title of Mark’s gospel, then that is significant, because it means that Mark’s gospel is intentionally incomplete. It is not the whole story; it is only “*the beginning of the story.*” Consider the possibility that YOU are the rest of the story

Read Mark 16:8

Nearly all Bible scholars agree that this verse is the original ending of Mark's gospel. The remaining 12 verses were added later, probably because no one cared for how Mark's gospel ended.

Q. -- Why do you suppose people disliked this ending? Is this a satisfying ending?

It is not only unsatisfying, it is also incomplete! That is the point. The literal translation of Mark 16:8 is: *"And they went out quickly from the place, because fear and great wonder had come on them: and they said nothing to anyone, because they were full of fear that..."*

Mark has committed another grammatical error. Translators make this ending into a complete sentence. They cannot tolerate an unfinished sentence at the end of a story. But if we take Mark's opening sentence seriously, we already knew back at the beginning of this story that this story was going to be only the beginning of the story of "the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!" It is only part one. The end hasn't been written yet. Mark stopped writing (mid-sentence!), but the story isn't finished. It's still going. 2000 years later the seed is still being scattered, and it is still growing, "we know not how."

At the end of Mark's Gospel a question hangs in the air – "how will it be possible for anyone to hear the good news and come to believe when these faithless disciples are all hiding in fear?"

And the answer is in our seed parables: "A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how." The disciples are the seeds carrying the DNA of this good news. They have been cast into the soil of the world, and like those seeds they are weak, hopeless, doubtful and incomplete, but like our seeds, with the word that is planted in them, they are also strong, hopeful, and full of potential. Make no mistake, the seed will sprout and grow, it will produce a harvest – even a huge harvest! God's reign comes.

What the seed is, How it gets planted, What it is for

What the seed is...

We do not, and (according to our parable) we cannot know how the seed comes to grow or how the smallest of seeds can become the greatest of shrubs, but we do have a very good idea of what the seed is, how it gets planted and what it is for.

A case study of the seed in Mark's Gospel...

Immediately after Jesus teaches the parable of the seeds, we have the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20). What we have here is an example of what Jesus was talking about in the seed parable.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac looks like both a success and a failure. (remember all of those the opposite words above?) Jesus has a miraculous healing and it leads to faith for the demoniac, but for the townspeople it leads only to fear and they end up begging Jesus to LEAVE! But watch what happens next... (read 5:18-20).

Discuss: What or WHO becomes “the seed” in this story?

Even though he has been rejected by the townspeople, Jesus sends the former demoniac to be the seed in that community. Jesus is ensuring that the seed will continue to get planted. Because, who knows? Perhaps some of those seeds will grow, “we know not how.”

Read Mark 4:14 – what is the seed or rather – how is it delivered?

See also Mark 2:13 -- 1:16-20 – 5:18-20 -- 6:7, 12-13, 30

...YOU are the seed.

Of course, in our texts it is clear that **the Word of God is the seed**. However, it is also clear that this word is never un-incarnate – the Word always takes on flesh – it always has a human delivery vehicle! So in a sense, we, as bearers of the word, are the seed – or at least the husk of the seed!

Now Let’s Consider what the seed is for.

Jesus shared this parable in an agrarian culture in which people were very close to the seeds and the earth. The mere mention of “seed” would bring to mind not just the seed itself, but also all the ways the seed is used. There are basically three uses for the kinds of seeds that these ancient people knew about.

- 1) To hold in your hand during a Bible Study on Mark 4. ☺
- 2) To replant to make more seeds.
- 3) To crush and make into food.

The cross is drawn in the seed. The seed has its passion. It is acted upon - crushed for sake of the hungry. At the mention of the seed, every person listening to Jesus knew and would have immediately envisioned the long process of gathering, threshing and mercilessly grinding the seeds so that they could become their bread.

The kingdom that grows up “we know not how” is a kingdom with a king who is also crushed for the sake of the “hungry.” Jesus at his cross was “crushed” for you and for me.

As seeds that are sent into the world with the good news, we, too are “crushed.” Here are three ways that we are being crushed as a community right now, and how that painful crushing is becoming a blessing to the world:

Other things to notice about this seed:

- 1) It takes root in weakness

Assign these verses to individuals or groups of two asking, “what are the circumstances in which the word takes root?”

- Mark 4:13-20, but also...
- Mark 2:3-5 -- Mark 5:1-20 -- Mark 5:25-34 -- Mark 7:24-30 -- Mark 10:15-16 -- Mark 10:49-52

Commentary: Each of these stories represents an instance in Mark’s Gospel when healing occurs, and Jesus observes/commends the existence of faith. In each case the person receiving “the seed” is in a particular state of vulnerability. While in Mark 4:18-19 Jesus teaches that “the cares of this world” can have the effect of neutralizing the power of the seed, these many other stories, also reveal that often, the real hopes and hurts of the world can make someone predisposed to receive the seed with joy.

Applying the Text to the Vision – “A Joyful sign of God’s abundant blessing”

God has gifted you and placed you in your community for a purpose: to be a joyful sign of God’s blessing. The following exercises are intended to help you imagine the ways that you are called to bless your community.

Discussion and Brainstorming

Step One: Discover together those places where the “soil is good for planting seeds.”

Recall, that in Mark, the takes root in places where there is vulnerability, hunger, pain or need.

What are the real hopes and hurts in your community? Who is hungry? Who is alone?

Who is in need of physical, mental or emotional healing?

[NOTE: Consider conducting a series of one-to-one conversations in your community to discover the real hopes and hurts around you – see the mission planning resources for a guide on conducting one-to-one conversations.]

Compile your findings on the real hopes and hurts in your community.

Step 1 – Discover together what is unique about you as God’s seeds to be planted in your unique soil. What or WHO are the seeds that your congregation has been given by God that can be planted within these real hopes and hurts? In other words, what are some of the gifts, talents and resources that you feel especially equipped to use to address the identified needs in your community?

You are God's seeds of the Kingdom – what is unique about you?

Explore together the following ways in which you are unique as God's seeds of the kingdom. As a group, call out and list as many as you can in 10 minutes or less. Put the list in a place where all can see.

- What passions and hopes?
- What talents?
- What significant relationships with individuals or organizations in the community?
- What physical assets?

[NOTE: Consider conducting an "Asset Mapping" exercise for a deeper exploration of your gifts and talents -- see the online mission planning resources for a guide on conducting an asset mapping exercise.]

Respond and Celebrate

Explore together where your unique gifts and passions align with the hopes and hurts of your community.

As you consider all that God has given you to be a blessing, what ways can you imagine using your gifts and talents to address the real hopes and hurts in your community?

From your list of hopes and hurts, select one or two real hopes and hurts that you would like to address in your community and what gifts you have to address them. Write them down so everyone can see.

Praise God for sending you as seeds to be a joyful sign of God's abundant blessing!

Suggestion based on our Lutheran Heritage:

As you continue planning, consider using Luther's Marks of the Church as a way of thinking about, planning and organizing your mission and ministry in your church and community.

Luther – after he had detailed the corruptions of the mediaeval church (On the Councils of the Church), Luther laid out, in a simple way what makes the church the church.

Perhaps it is time to return to the simplicity of this early reformation insight. Luther identified what he called the "Marks of the Church." These are the specific ways in which the assembly called "the church" was different than all other human assemblies. These are the ways in which God was at work in this assembly through the hands of the assembled – *God's work, Our hands*. Put another way, the activities around each of the Marks of the Church can represent the many creative ways in which God's invites us to plant the seed.

Here are Luther's Five Marks of the Church and some ways to think about shaping your life in ministry:

- 1) Proclaiming the Word
 - a. How are you sharing the good news as you live and love and serve both within and beyond your church walls?
 - b. What stories of what God has done in your life, or in your community do you have to tell?
 - c. In what ways are might you be called to teach God's word in your community?
 - d. What Bible stories of people proclaiming the word to you love to tell and share?
- 2) Baptizing
 - a. How are you inviting and receiving guests and visitors into all aspects of your life together?
 - b. What specific practices do you have in place to extend hospitality?
 - c. How is your "hospitality of heart?" What are you doing to insure that you are not just "going through the motions" of welcoming, but that you are making yourself available and affirming to ALL of your neighbors?
 - d. How do you celebrate what God has done for you in Baptism?
 - e. How are you teaching those preparing for baptism and those who have been baptized to follow Jesus?
 - f. What Bibles stories about Baptism do you like to tell and share?
- 3) Sharing the Lord's Supper
 - a. When you have food fellowship or conduct a feeding ministry of any kind, what are some creative ways you could make a connection to the Lord's Table?
 - b. What Bible stories about feeding or about the Lord's Supper do you love to tell and share?
 - c. How are you making room for all of God's people when you gather for meal fellowship or to feed the hungry?
- 4) Forgiving and reconciling
 - a. What are the places or people in your community who need healing?
 - b. Where the relationships that are damaged and what are you doing to restore them?
 - c. How are you extending forgiveness to your neighbor?
 - d. How are you working for peace in your community and in your world?
 - e. How are you addressing situations of injustice in your community and your world?
 - f. What Bible stories about forgiveness and reconciliation do you love to share and tell?
- 5) Calling to vocation
 - a. How are you helping disciples understand their Christian vocation - in other words: how are you encouraging all people live lives shaped and formed by above four activities?
 - b. How you inviting people into service in a way that conveys a sense of God's call?
 - c. How are you helping people discover their unique gifts and to use them in their daily lives.
 - d. Do you have a spiritual gifts ministry?
 - e. What Bible stories about calling into ministry do you love to share and tell?

Closing Prayer

Keep, O Lord, your household the church in our steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim you truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.¹

Song: You are the Seed (WOV #753)

¹ From the Book of Common Prayer, contemporary Collect for the Season after Pentecost, Proper 6.