

# “The Next 150 Years”

A Series of Sermonettes for the Sesquicentennial Celebration  
of Saint Mark’s Lutheran Church: Watertown, WI

*December 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004*

## “The Next 150 Years ... for Children”

*Pastor Michael Jensen*

Grace and Peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we celebrate our 150 anniversary today, it is worth first noting that all thanks and praise for anything this congregation has accomplished, is accomplishing or ever will accomplish belongs to Him who was and is and ever will be - our gracious God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. (For the danger is that looking at what Christ has done for us, we get too wrapped up in ourselves and take our eyes off Jesus.)

You may not realize it, but every time you look at the front of this church, you see two Bible passages that set our congregation’s priorities. Of course, they are a bit hidden. The fact that both are in German doesn’t help either.

- The first passage is on the altar, hidden behind the small cross. The word’s are Jesus’ own: “*Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest*” (Matthew 11:28.) With this passage Christ reminds us that His Gospel promise is to all, because He died and rose for all and wants all to be temporally and eternally refreshed by the forgiveness that is found in Him alone.
- The second passage gives us a very specific purpose for our work at St. Mark’s. It too is hidden. It’s carved on the top of the baptismal font. Again, they are Jesus’ own words: “*Let the little children come to me*” (Mark 10:14). With these words before us, we are reminded that Jesus wants children to be very important at St. Mark’s. Sharing the message of Jesus with children is to be one of our highest priorities.

As we look back on the founding of our congregation, we see that Christ has given us reason to celebrate. For 150 years He has moved us to make sharing the Gospel with children a top priority at St. Mark’s.

- From day one of this congregation’s existence, it was decided that we would have a Christian Day school. Our founding fathers were determined that the children would get more than just a lick and a promise when it came to hearing about Jesus. Rather, they wanted to give their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus daily.
- As the needs of the congregation changed, St. Mark’s also established a Sunday School, so that all children of the congregation might learn of their Savior.
- It is also something to cherish that St. Mark’s was privilege to be right in the thick of things when Lakeside Lutheran High School was founded. And, to this day, we are privileged to be a member in the Lakeside Federation, and we continue to gladly support this school where teens daily receive Christ.
- A very unique part of this congregation’s history also involves Christian education. God privileged St. Mark’s to play a significant role in the founding of our synod’s worker training system. This congregation helped found Northwestern University, which became Northwestern College and Prep, which today lives on in Luther Prep here in Watertown and our college in New Ulm.

Yes, as we look back on 150 years at St. Mark’s, we have much to thank God for in the area of serving children with the Gospel. And, today, as we look ahead to the future, we don’t just celebrate, we also rededicate ourselves to sharing Jesus with the coming generations. But, rededication, by necessity, also involves repentance.

You may recall what Jesus’ reaction was when His disciples would not let parents bring their children to Jesus. He was indignant! To be sure, He is still indignant when adults hinder children from coming to Him.

- Parents, God is still indignant when we think it's so very important to give our children sports programs, music lessons, a college education and all the toys money can buy, but fail to give them the one thing they really need . . . Jesus!
- Jesus still is indignant when we as members of the congregation take the attitude: *"Well, I don't have any kids in the Christian Day School or Sunday School or at Lakeside, so it's not really my concern."* God is still upset with us when we say, *"Well, if those parents want it, then let them pay for it,"* as if we didn't care whether or not children got the best in Christian Education. God wants the sharing of Christ with all children to be the concern of all of us.
- Parents, it still grieves the Holy Spirit if we drop off our children at school or Sunday School, maybe even pay some fees, and then fall into the false notion that we've done enough for our children . . . church is optional. . . and once the fees are paid, offerings are optional too.

Yes, rededication to our youth starts with repentance before our God. If we have grown weary in serving our youth . . . if we feel it too much of a burden . . . may the Holy Spirit work repentance in us.

Then, may we hear again the voice of Jesus call to us all, *"Come to me. . . Come to me, all you who have grown weary of care or cost in serving your children. Come to me . . . Come to me, all you who feel it too much of a burden to work at offering my Word to your children. I will give you rest. I will refresh you, forgiving your sins of misplaced priorities. I will refresh you, encouraging you to go on. I will refresh you, giving you the strength you need to serve the children with the Gospel.*

Today is a day of celebration for what Christ has done for children at St. Mark's. By Christ's grace, today is also a day of rededication, as we hear Christ's direction for our next 150 years . . . *"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them."*

## **"The Next 150 Years ... for Marriage & Family"**

*Pastor William Heiges*

For 150 years blushing brides and nervous grooms have stood before God's altar at St. Mark's and exchanged their vows to forsake all others and be faithful to each other until, in death, God parts them. Those same couples would return (sometimes again & again) with a little bundle of joy wrapped in the arms and have their babies baptized. Some 14 years later they would sit in these pews and listen to their young sons and daughters speak their confirmation vows to be faithful to God to the point of death. And some years later they would witness their sons and daughters marry, have their children baptized, and repeat the cycle of life, which would be broken only by death. For 150 years two of God's greatest gifts, marriage and family, have survived well at St. Mark's.

What does the next 150 years hold for Marriage & Family at St. Mark's. If each of us takes to heart the challenge Joshua issued to the people of his day (Joshua 25:14-15), Marriage & Family will fare well.

The most important relationship in our life is our relationship with God. That is the only relationship that is eternal. But after that relationship Marriage & Family rank up there with our highest priorities in life. Satan knows that and reserves his most vicious attacks for Marriage & Family. His goal is to destroy marriages and break up families. That is how he wreaks his greatest havoc on the church and on society. He knows that by hurting families he will seriously hinder the mission potential of the church. That is why husbands and wives need to work together now more than ever before to protect their marriage and family from the threats they face.

And the greatest threat against marriage, home and family does not come from the outside, from Satan or the eroding values of an increasingly godless society. The greatest threat comes from within our own hearts. A leading Christian counselor was asked for the #1 reason for the breakup of marriages. Without a moment's hesitation he said, "Selfishness." We all too often underestimate the power of our inherent sinful nature. We all have the natural tendency to think of ourselves first.

That's why husbands and wives need to repent of all the thoughts, words and actions (or lack of actions) that have hurt their partner and their family. And isn't great that we find endless forgiveness for all our faults and failures of the past in Christ and his death for us? In order for Marriage & Family to not just survive, but thrive for the next 150 years, we need men and women who will stand tall and resist the pull of their own sinful nature. We need husbands and wives who refuse to accept the pattern of this world's thinking and behavior when it comes to sex, marriage, home and family. We need men who will, like Joshua, lead their families – not just protect and provide for them, but actually lead them spiritually, emotionally and physically. And we need wives who will stand tall by their husband's side and pass on godly values and scriptural principles for life issues. We need families that will pray together, and worship together, and read God's Word together. To lead our families successfully into the future, we ourselves need to be led by God. We need to take to heart and practice the advice God gave Joshua (read Joshua 1:6-9) when He called Joshua to lead the Israelites.

We need men and women, husbands and wives who live to serve the needs of each other and their family. We have the greatest example of that in Jesus, who said, *"For [I] did not come to be served, but to serve and to give [my] life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45). And he proved it by serving our greatest need, our need for forgiveness and salvation, when he suffered, bled and died for us.

And like he said, he has given us an example that we should do for others as he has done for us. We get our motivation and our power to serve the needs of our spouse and our family from Jesus Christ and what he did for us.

For 150 years the heritage of faith in Jesus Christ has been passed on and handed down from grandparents to parents, and now we parents have the awesome responsibility of firmly passing faith in Jesus on to our children. That is the legacy we leave. That is our most important heritage – a heritage of faith.

If marriage, home and family are going to survive and thrive for the next 150 years, it has to start now, right here, with you and me, our generation. It's time for us to establish our priorities and determine what we are going to do to protect and prosper two of God's greatest gifts, marriage and family. It's time for us to stand tall in the face of culture that devalues marriage, home and family, and boldly declare for all to hear (by our words and actions), ***“But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD!”*** Amen.

## **“The Next 150 Years ... for the Mission of Our Church”**

*Pastor James Werner*

Why are you here on this earth? That is a question that each of us has to answer for ourselves and it will be reflected in how we live and in our attitude about life and what is important. Have you noticed that most businesses and companies today have a mission statement? It states clearly why this business is operating and what it hopes to accomplish. St. Mark's has a mission statement. We have a statement, which clearly states why we exist and why we are here in Watertown and what we intend to do.

Our founders 150 years ago understood their mission. Pastor Christian Sans came here to gather like-minded German Lutheran Christians into a congregation for the purpose of worshiping and praising God, reaching out to the lost in our community and the world and to establish a Christian School whereby we would instruct the youth in the truths of God's Word. Our mission hasn't changed much in 150 years. We still are here to gather people together to worship and praise God. We still are operating a Christian school for training our youth in the way that they should go. We are still reaching out to the lost in our community and the world with the good news of Jesus the Savior of all people.

Do we always get it right? Probably not. We never have. You could look in our history and see that at times we may have viewed our church as a club with special rules and regulations for people like us rather than as a hospital whose doors are open to anyone who comes by. Thank God that he has forgiven us for our failures to always understand our mission and purpose. Thank God that Jesus died for those sins that we commit. Thank God that he continues to remind us and encourage us – “Be my witnesses in Watertown, Wisconsin, Jefferson and Dodge Counties, Wisconsin the USA and throughout the world.” As members of this congregation that is the commission that Jesus has personally given to each of us and to our entire congregation. We are witnesses. We are not here to convert people. We are here to tell people about Jesus, who loved them, died for them and has prepared an eternal home for them in heaven. We are here to love them and forgive them just as God loves and forgives us in Jesus Christ. With the thousands of people that God has brought through these doors and into this congregation for 150 years, we have been able to spread this message throughout this community and have had members from our congregation go throughout the world sharing the love of God and the forgiveness we all have in Jesus Christ.

In the next 150 years may God continue to help us keep it straight. St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church is a place for people who are hurting, who are imperfect and know it, who need help, guidance and strength from our loving Lord and Savior. It is a place where people know that when they come they will hear about their sin and imperfections, but most importantly they will hear about their loving and forgiving Savior Jesus. May we always keep our doors open to anyone and everyone so that we can be the witnesses Jesus has called us to be.

## **“The Next 150 Years ... for Missions World-Wide”**

*Pastor Karl Walther*

**Eighteen Fifty-Four**.... Before computers, before television, before airplanes, before automobiles, and before a whole lot of other things we take for granted.... The State of Wisconsin was six years old; Abraham Lincoln would be elected president six years later. And Saint Mark's was founded....

What was the state of Christianity back then? And what was happening in the eternally important area of spreading the good news of Jesus the Savior to others?

Well, Europe was the center of Christianity: from the Scandinavian countries down through Italy, and from the British Isles over to Russia—just as it had been for a few centuries more than a whole millennium.

But Christianity had been spreading more than usual during the course of the previous centuries. When the Europeans colonized Africa, when they colonized parts of Asia, and when the Europeans flooded into the Americas, they brought the gospel with them—also to Watertown.

**Two Thousand Four**... What's the state of Christianity now? And where is mission work taking place?

Well, these days the USA is the biggest, most widely recognized "Christian" country on earth. Paradoxically, it is also something like the fifth biggest mission field. That's because we're a big country, and although many Christians reside here, many non-Christians do, too.

For its part, old Europe is very secular. But the good news of Jesus is finding acceptance by more and more people world-wide—especially in Africa, also in Asia, and also in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe.

**Twenty-One Fifty-Four**... A hundred fifty years from now.... Who can imagine the advances that will take place in technology?! Who can imagine the advances that will take place in transportation?!

And who can imagine what Christianity will look like? Will there be many Christians left in the United States??? Possibly—if our freedoms of speech and religion and assembly and press are remaining. Possibly—if the proper balance between church and state remains. And maybe even probably—if Christians here make themselves busy sharing the gospel. But will Africa be the center of Christianity? More probably (?)—unless the gospel has moved on from there already. Will Islam's enslaving power over a billion people be broken by then? Let's hope!

Or by that year, Twenty-One Fifty-Four, will Christ have returned?!

Who knows?! This much I do know. Every baby girl born in Africa today, every old man dying today in Asia, and all of them that there will be over the course of the next one hundred fifty years, and you and I—we all have the same two problems. One: our bodies are subject to death. Two: our souls are sick with sin. And no mere human – not Mohammed, not the founders of Hinduism or Buddhism, not anyone else – no one has come up with a solution to those problems.

But Jesus did. The sin of your soul—he took that away, when he took it on his shoulders on the cross. The death of your body—he underwent that, but he rose from it, and he promises, "Because I live, you also will live."

And brothers and sisters, that's true for a whole planet full of people! And nothing – nothing! – matters more than telling them. So, Jesus speaks two words to you today—both from the Book of Luke. First: *Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field.* And second: *I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.* Amen!