

“Our 2018 Target”

Dear friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus and a Happy New Year to all of you as we enter into another chapter in our life together as a congregation.

A number of years ago, there was a Peanuts cartoon (in the paper) in which Charlie Brown was practicing archery in his backyard. (Maybe you saw it.) Instead of aiming at a target, (what he did was), he would shoot an arrow at his fence and then, (after he shot it), he would walk over and draw a target around wherever the arrow struck.

In one of the captions that followed, in her normal non-supportive fashion, Lucy says, “Charlie Brown, why are you drawing the target after you shoot at the fence?” He says, “Because that way I never miss my target.”

Now, that's one way, as we move into a new year, to come at setting goals and priorities. Just live out the year ahead and then decide, based upon what happens, to make (whatever happens) your priorities and goals. If nothing else, it ensures that you will never fail. Set your New Year's resolutions, if you will, (after the fact), based upon what you actually do, and you'll never break any of them.

The trouble with that approach (obviously) is that even if you never fail in keeping your resolutions, (hitting your target), you might very much fail in reaching the goals and priorities that you had hoped to accomplish and that actually matter.

What we've tried to do (here at St. Timothy's), especially as we move (each year) into a new year, is to be right up front about where we believe God is leading us, what we're hoping to see happen, and how best to move forward in accomplishing the goals (we've set) for the coming year.

For the next three Sundays, starting today, we're going to be doing just that. We'll be spending our sermon time zeroing in on what we believe God is leading us to be about in the year ahead and sharing a bit about how we hope to move forward in light of where (we believe) he is leading.

Now, even with that (as we know), there are no guarantees that we'll reach our intended goals or make good on our priorities. In everything we do, (as a congregation), there is always an element of faith and a working of the Spirit that we cannot control or predict, nor would we want to. At the same time, the odds are much better that we'll accomplish what we set out to accomplish, if we have a target (to aim at) before we actually shoot.

What I want to do today, as we begin these three weeks, is to take a look at where we've been (what's already in place), talk for a while about where we're going (what we're doing in this next year), and then close out with a brief focus on the first of the three priorities we're setting for ourselves in 2018. Pastor Jonna and Pastor Brian will be following up (in the next two weeks) on the other two.

And so, where have we been and what is it that has led us to where we are? If you remember back, two years ago, we adopted a new Vision Statement as a congregation. We put in place a Vision that has been and will (continue to be), in the years to come, what drives us forward. It's also a Vision that gives us a benchmark against which to determine what we see as priorities for our future.

We also put in place (at the same time) an Identity Statement and a Mission Statement, that each helps to inform and to clarify the Vision we have. All three of these statements, (our Vision, our Identity, our Mission), are based upon the calling and commission given to us by Jesus.

Take a look at these statements, (for just a moment), we've shared them before, starting with our identity, it states who we are. We are...

“St. Timothy's is a faith community, committed to worshiping God and working through the power of the Holy Spirit, to transform people into disciples of Jesus Christ.” (Say it with me.) “St. Timothy's is a faith community, committed to worshiping God and working through the power of the Holy Spirit to transform people into disciples of Jesus Christ.” That's who we are. That's our identity.

Now, walk it through... “We are a faith community.” That's what brings us together, our common and our shared faith.

“Committed to worshiping God.” That’s what we do when we’re here. It’s one of our ongoing priorities. It’s one those things (because of our identity) that will never change.

“Working through the power of the Holy Spirit.” (An important piece), this isn’t just on us; it happens only through him. We need to remember that. It’s only through the power of the Spirit.

“To transform people.” Don’t forget. This isn’t just another club we’ve joined (in the church). It’s about real-life change, the transformation of people’s lives.

“Into disciples of Jesus Christ.” That’s the goal. That’s who we are. It’s our identity. And it’s in that identity that we find our mission.

Now, take a look at our Mission Statement that also gives clarity to why we exist. “Our Mission (why we exist) is to equip and empower people to have an eternal impact in the lives of others, locally and globally, for the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Say it with me.) “Our Mission is...to equip and empower people to have an eternal impact in the lives of others, locally and globally, for the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Now, we could stop right here (if we wanted) and spend the rest of our time with this statement of our mission. Just think about what this says and (the scope) of what it means. “Our mission is to equip and empower people...to have an eternal impact...in the lives of others...locally and globally...for the Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s why we’re here. That’s the reason we exist. That’s quite the statement.

Again, walk it through. We’re not here for ourselves and for what we might want. (We’re not.) We’re here for the world and for what Jesus wants to see happen in the lives of others.

We’re not here for the sake of everything being better (only in this life) while we’re alive, and hoping we can make a difference. We’re here to have an impact while we’re (still alive) that goes far beyond this life and into eternity. (The scope is never-ending.)

And we’re not here because we think it’s a good thing to be here, even though we might, and it is. (That’s not why we’re here.) We’re here to make a difference for the One who was and who is and who will always be our Lord, Jesus Christ.

As we go after our Vision as a congregation, (our target), where we believe God is leading us in our future, we cannot lose sight of our identity, (who we are), nor of our mission, (why we exist). They are essential in shaping what we are called to do, and why we do it.

Now, let’s turn to our Vision. Based upon who we are (our identity), what we’ve been called to do (our mission), and where we believe God is leading us, here’s our vision. (And, again, this is nothing new.) If you’ve been around here, you should know this.

“Our Vision is to...**Know** the Father, **Grow** as Disciples of Jesus, and **Go** with the Spirit.” (Say it with me.) “Our Vision is to Know the Father, Grow as Disciples of Jesus, and Go with the Spirit.”

It’s simple. “Know, Grow, and Go...Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” When people ask you about your church family, what we’re about in this place, that’s what you can tell them.

We are a “Know, Grow, and Go” congregation. We’re a body of believers committed to trusting in and learning from and living by the presence and the power and the promises that are ours in this God we follow.

This is not a “trendy church.” This is not a place where (what we do and why we do it), it’s all going to change every time a new idea or a new way of thinking comes along. That’s not who we are.

Who we are is, St. Timothy’s Lutheran Church is a church deeply committed to knowing and growing and going, (living out) a faith that has been passed on (for centuries) from one generation to another, going all the way back to the Lord Jesus, himself. That’s who we are.

Our Vision is to be that kind of church, a church that knows who the Father is (understands his heart), that is committed to learning and growing and walking each day with our Lord Jesus (what he’s all about), and that is passionate about taking what we have learned, applying it in our lives, and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us to make a difference in what we do and say (in and to the world) in our everyday lives. That’s who we are.

Our Identity, our Mission, and our Vision, they all work together to keep us on track, focused in what we do, and constantly and continually challenging and encouraging us to not lose sight of who we are, what we have been called to be about, and what God wants to see happen in and through us as followers of Jesus.

Now, I realize we’re spending a lot of time with this, but it’s important. We need to get this right, if we’re going to make progress in getting anything right. This is where it starts. It’s what we’ve already put into place.

Let's shift (for a moment), to where we're going. This Vision we have will be in front of us for many years. What is it in this coming year that we hope to accomplish? What's going to be our target?

Three major emphases we're going to have at St. Timothy's in 2018. (Take a look)...

Living and Growing as Disciples of Jesus

Working to Reach the Next Generation of Believers

Witnessing and Serving in the Name of Christ (repeat)

Now, (as you can tell), these are rather broad categories. We know that. And (in many ways) they're things we go after every year. (They really are.) This year (in that way) is no different.

What makes it different (this year) is that, because everything (can't be a priority) in any given year, these things will be priorities for us in the year ahead. We'll be going after them in a variety of ways.

We're going to be working (in 2018) to build upon the foundation we already have in place to take seriously our Lord's call and commission to "be" and to "make" disciples. Both of those are important. We can't be faithful and committed in "being" disciples, if we're not also faithful and committed to "making" disciples. They're both important.

Now, we've done a lot in the past few years (to move this forward), but there's a lot more to be done. We're going to be pushing our discipling efforts to the next levels in 2018.

Second, we're going to be taking some very deliberate steps in responding to the call (we have) to reach the next generations for Jesus. (This is a major challenge in front of us.) It's more of a challenge today (in 2018) than it has ever been in my 31 years of ministry. It's a much more challenging "mission field" in our culture today than it has been for a long time.

But there's an opportunity there that (I truly believe) we can grasp, because many of our young people are grasping to find (meaning in life) in places where it's not going to be found. (They're searching.) But we know where it is. We know what it is. (We know the answer to who it is.) But we need to stay focused (and on target), if it's going to happen. 2018 is going to be a year where we increase the intensity of our focus (more directly) on this particular priority.

And, third, witnessing and serving in the name of Jesus is going to be an area where we plan to increase opportunities for a shared response (and involvement) within the congregation, as well as to raise the bar on our own individual responsibility (and inclusion) in speaking and sharing our faith.

Honestly, (my friends), of all the areas where we need to be challenged and to grow (as a congregation), this is the one (I believe) where we have the greatest opportunity for growth.

We're going to be challenging and encouraging and supporting the witnessing and serving efforts of all of our members, not just here at church, but (more importantly) out in the world. Because that's where it's most effective, and that's where (for all of us) we need to make it happen. That's our target.

Now, these are not the only things we're going to be concerned about (going after) in 2018. Obviously, there's a lot more we'll be doing than just these three. But we are going to be giving some very directed energy to each of these areas, in hopes that we can "move the ball forward." if you will, in accomplishing the goals (we believe) God is setting before us in the coming year. We'll be sharing (more specifics) on how we'll be coming at these three areas as the year unfolds.

Let me close today with a brief word about discipleship, and tie it not only to what we've said (already) this morning, (about following Jesus), but to what we find in the verses we read today. In Mark's gospel, and we could spend weeks on this, right out of the shoot, there's a declaration made that we don't want to miss.

Chapter one, verse one, (Mark says), "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." ("The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.") Right out of the shoot, Mark makes a declaration.

He says, what I'm going to tell you (in the chapters that follow) is what God has done for you (and is doing for you) in his Son, Jesus Christ. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, the word "Gospel," means "good news." Mark says I want to tell you about the good news of Jesus Christ. In other words, in what follows, what you're going to hear, (he says) is not good advice on how you are to live, but good news about what God has already done for your life.

We don't have the time (here today), but don't miss what's happening. The message of the Bible, the good news of the gospel, what God has done for us in Jesus...this is fundamentally different from every other religion in our world. It is fundamentally different.

The essence of other religions is advice. (That's what it is.) This is what you have to do. This is how you have to live. Go do it and you'll be right with God. That's what they're about, and that's how they work.

The Christian faith (and the Christian life) are fundamentally different...and that's why Mark starts as he does. "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The beginning of the good news that there is nothing you can and need to do to be right with God. (There is nothing you need to do...nothing at all.) That's where he starts.

Now, jump to verse fourteen and what happens? In the calling of the first disciples, look at what Jesus says. (He says), "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come, (he said), the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.'" ('The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.')

This is fundamentally different. (It's not the same thing.) The good news is, (the gospel is), the declaration is that (in Jesus), God has made you right with him. (God has made you right with him.) He has. In Jesus, you are right with God. You are.

The discipleship question is, "Do you believe it?" The discipleship question is, "Will you take this good news and apply it in your life?" Or will you, (as so many people in this world do), hear it and apply it and use it (in your life) as if it's only good advice?

That's the "following Jesus" question. That's where this all starts. That's what the Christian faith and life are all about. And that's where we need to start and what we need to be about, if we're going to be about what God wants us to be about in 2018.

Our 2018 Target: Let's not turn this good news (about Jesus) and our calling (in him) into anything less. Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for this New Year and for the chance (we have) to restart and refocus our lives in Jesus. We thank you for the good news that is ours in him and for the calling we have to live (each day) as disciples of Christ. Father, help us, in these months ahead, as we seek to be faithful and obedient to you, to never lose sight of the target you've given us. Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Keep our hearts in tune with your will. And keep our spirits guided by your Spirit, that we might be used (by you) (in this coming year) to reach the world for Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.