

August 31, 2014 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 16:21-28

I brought a very strange and maybe even offensive thing with me today as a sermon illustration. It is the old rototiller my congregation uses for its garden project. For the past number of years St. John's in Victor has had a garden area on the land of one of its members. The garden is between a third and half an acre. We raise things and then sell them to the congregation. The money raised is donated to the annual World Hunger Appeal.

When we first started it we had a problem. We didn't have a rototiller to help with weeding. If you've priced one of these things lately you know that they don't come cheap. It would take years to recover the cost of a new one. What would we be working for, the World Hunger Appeal or the money to buy a rototiller?

One of our members piped up and said he had this old unused rototiller in his garage. Someone had actually given it to him and while he used it a bit, he hadn't used it in maybe 15 years. He'd gladly donate it.

Well, it took a lot of work to get it running again. As you'd expect, the carburetor was gummed up and clogged. The engine was full of mouse nests, the belts were gone and numerous pieces were missing. Plus, someone in the past had done a number of creative repairs. The throttle cable must have rusted away and a new one was installed. There's a reverse feature, but instead of the handy little knob that's supposed to engage it there's a fender washer instead. Holes in the crankcase breather are covered with duct tape. Some of the linkages had been replaced with what looks like wire from clothes hangers. Nuttiest of all, the correct spark plug had been replaced by an oversize one. That meant the little shut off feature that cuts the electrical system didn't work. In other words, once you started it there was no way to turn it off.

Once we got it running we discovered more problems. The starter rope tore. We replaced it only to discover the new rope was getting tangled and the recoil feature didn't work. Plus the ratchet system that's supposed to let the engine spin but the rope be still would jam and squeal terribly. Once you fixed that then the rope wouldn't engage the crankshaft to start it.

I'll personally take credit for that fix because what I did was cut the front of the engine off entirely. Now you put the pulley on the front of the engine, wrap the rope around it, and then give it a little test pull to see if the mechanism is engaging. If not, you give the crankshaft a good hit with a hammer and that puts all the pieces in the right place. Then you pull it to start it (and it usually takes only one pull), and once the engine is running, you slip a screwdriver between this spinning pulley and the engine, you stand to the side, and you flick it off. If you're in a grassy area you'd better keep an eye on where it goes because it'll roll quite a distance.

To most people's eyes this machine is a complete piece of junk with more headaches than it's worth. But, inside is a solid little engine with good power. The gears, tines and drivetrain are all in great shape, and at the end of the day it does a lot of work for not much money. It gets the job done and it does a good job. Without it our garden project wouldn't be possible.

Sometimes I think our churches have a lot of parallels. It would be great if we had a new rototiller with everything perfect and easy, but we don't. We do have a machine that gets the job done though. And sometimes when we look at our churches I wonder if we don't see something along the lines of this rototiller. Budgets aren't what we want them to be. Attendance isn't as high as it once was. Sunday school doesn't happen anymore. People seem tired. New people don't seem interested. It's easy to think the machinery of the church is just too tired, too old, too worn out.

We easily forget that the core of the church is the love and grace of God. That is as solid and strong as it ever was. And it will always be solid and strong. God has given us a great and powerful tool in the church. It is our job to use it.

It takes creative thinking and adaptation to use this rototiller. And I think we are in a time of creative thinking in the church. Old patterns and models we thought were essential may not be. Just like anyone would say you can't start a small engine without the rope pull working. Well, it

turns out you can. And things we once thought were essential to the church turn out not to be.

What does the Bible say about church is to run? What day of the week are we to worship on according to the Bible? How are worship services to be structured? How often are we to worship? All sorts of questions the Bible gives absolutely no answer to. The Bible really only has two requirements for the operation of the church and worship services.

One, in 1 Corinthians 14:40 Paul says, "All things should be done decently and in order." So, worship should not be total chaos and everyone who wants to have input should have the chance.

Two, 1 Corinthians 11:21 says don't get drunk on the communion wine.

We have to remember that the earliest Christians had strong churches too and they did not look at all like ours do today. They did not have buildings but met in houses. They did not sit

in rows of seats but probably around a table or a collection of tables. Communion was not a scrap of bread and a miniscule shot glass of wine guaranteed to made sure no one gets drunk. No, communion was basically a covered dish dinner.

Worship involved eating, scripture reading, conversation, singing, preaching - it probably looked a lot like the God Talk gatherings you have. That is the church strong and powerful - every bit as strong, powerful and relevant as sitting in rows in a building on a set day of the week.

God has given you a powerful tool in the church and broad freedom for how you choose to use it. I say, use it, and use it creatively, boldly and confidently. That's what the church needs.

I want to end with one final image about this rototiller. If you were in the business of selling new and used rototillers would you put this thing in your showroom? No, of course you wouldn't. No one would buy it and it would be an embarrassment to your business.

Does the church sometimes seem like this rototiller - an embarrassment to your life? Does it feel like you've got to be a loser or a needy weakling or have some sort of problem with you if you're going to have something like this in your life? Many highly educated people call religion a crutch for the weak minded.

In our culture today the church's image is like this rototiller - some old relic that hasn't gotten the hint that it's supposed to die. So get on with it!

The church does not get a neutral viewing in our world today. It is a negative one. Tens of thousands of Christians are being rounded up and killed by ISIS in Iraq and the international community barely raises an eyebrow. Recently a Jewish leader in the New York Times pointed out that these Christians are being treated like the Jews in WWII but no one seems to care, and he called for outrage from Jews across the world, but no outrage came.

I don't say this to make you feel like a victim or make you mad. That's not what I mean. Just know the reality that we face. The truth is many people are not interested in God's grace. Stupid as that sounds to us, that it reality. And that's something the Bible talks about all the time. Jesus said, "The light as come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light..." (John 3:19)

Some things never change. You are the light of the world. You are the church, God's tool to build his kingdom. God will succeed in doing what God wants to get done through you because God does not fail. Be creative, be innovative, be courageous, and have fun as God's chosen people. Amen