

In Gotham City the crime can get out of control. Mr. Freeze, the Riddler, the Penguin, Catwoman, the Joker, and others have all tried to have their way with the city and its citizens. The police are largely helpless against these master criminals. Only one superhero has the ability to stop them. His mission, stop the crime of Gotham City and give the residents hope.

That would be Batman's mission. It's a grand mission because they keep making movies about more criminals in his city trying to do bad things. But can Batman stop all crime? He might try, but it's impossible for him to stop all crime. No one can be everywhere crime is happening. Just because he can't doesn't mean it's a mission to stop pursuing.

Not every one of you was here eight or nine years ago. So for you and me, the mission and vision of this congregation is something you didn't help create, but it is something you get to be a part of. The mission vision wasn't written to stick in a drawer. It's more than words on a page. It's a mission, but not like Batman's that tries to give hope. It's a mission but not impossible. Turn in your service folders to page 12 and read just the first portion with me. **Gethsemane Evangelical Lutheran Church is a garden planted by the Lord in which people grow in grace and glorify God with the fruits of faith.** That's at the forefront of our study for the next five weeks. We'll study the different components to see why we exist and where we're going. We'll see that without the Lord we would achieve nothing. This morning let's look at the first section of the mission vision statement, which finds its Scriptural support in the gospel, and ask the Lord to...

### **Enrich our souls with the gospel**

An experienced pruner knows the garden is not the place to hold back. Plants that might look perfectly fine sometimes need just that little bit of pruning to really grow stronger. Others need chopping down to the ground so next season they can return full and vibrate. The inexperienced will be shocked thinking any pruning is too drastic that they're dead. But the good pruner knows the plant will be healthier. Jesus uses the picture of a garden where every branch has work done on it. The gardener is experienced and knows what each branch needs.

We're in this garden, God's garden. God is the gardener and tends his garden in just the right ways. But we humans would rather care for ourselves. That's our nature. So we resist the care of the gardener. When it hurts especially, we get to thinking we could do better. Care could come from a better source. We convince ourselves we could make ourselves healthier and grow stronger. The gardener's work, God's work, isn't that important. We fill up on self-help books or calendars filled with inspirational sayings. We avoid the gardener and go our own way.

Branches in the garden aren't independent though. Life only comes from one place. **"I am the vine; you are the branches."** We aren't on our own. The vine is our survival. That vine is Jesus Christ our Savior. By a connection with him we live and thrive in the garden. To continue to live and grow we need to be connected to him. That connection was started not by us, but by Christ through his Word. It didn't happen because you wanted it to happen or because you made it happen. God promises it took means to make it happen. It took the Word of God or it took baptism to connect lost branches to the life giving vine. Those are the only means that get us into the garden.

Careful gardening sometimes means drastic steps. If an invasive disease has infected part of a plant then it might mean half the plant needs to be cut away in order to save the rest. It looks drastic, but that's how gardens grow and keep growing. The gardener sometimes needs to prune out in order to strengthen the whole. Pruning always involves destruction, some big some small. But it's destruction for a purpose.

Each person in here wants the best for our church. Like we do in our lives we want to push this church towards perfection. So we want the brightest and best looking church building. We want impactful programs that strike the balance between serving our own members and generating fellowship as well as reaching out to the lost. We want to serve, not forever, but the right amount of time that allows us to feel like we made a difference. We want to have worship that's meaningful, moving, and both easy to sing and challenging enough for gifted singers. We want it great, and some will take it upon themselves to make it great. It might seem like right motives, but it can still be wrong focus. If it's what we want or what I want, even if it's for the church, it's still all about us/me and what I/we can do to make it happen. It's what makes us/me happy, what I/we like to see or hear. We're at risk because we've taken the pruning from God and we're doing it ourselves.

Our sinful self-satisfying pruning can be a slow process of separation. If the church isn't perfect the way we want then maybe we don't come as much. We don't support programs when they happen, we can't be bothered to show up, and eventually we don't give those events another thought. What's next is loss of desire for Holy Communion. Ultimately we get comfortable not hearing God's Word on a regular basis. We convince ourselves we can be connected to God at home. We can pray and think about God and that's enough. Then suddenly those don't happen. Before we know it we've separated ourselves completely from the vine, Jesus. We lose our connection to Christ.

Understanding your mission in life as well as the mission of this congregation means we understand where strength and support come from. **"If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."** Your connection with Christ is of supreme importance. That connection with Christ happens only through the Means of Grace. You find Christ in the gospel, the Word of God and the sacraments. Only by repeated exposure to the gospel in Word and sacraments can you remain in the vine. Jesus is proclaimed in the Means of Grace. The Holy Spirit works through the Means of Grace. When you hear the Word your faith is strengthened and your connection with the vine is solidified. When you partake of Holy Communion you receive the very body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread for the forgiveness of your sins. Your connection with the vine is solidified. When you see the font or witness a baptism you're reminded of your own baptism on which day Christ Jesus turned to the Father and said 'Here's one for whom I died'. Your connection with the vine is solidified.

Could you find those Means of Grace somewhere else besides here at church? You could in part, but why would you want to miss out? You'd miss worship which is so important to enriching your soul with the gospel. Seeing all these people who believe the same thing gives strength. Christian encouragement that happens before and after worship is strengthening. The Lord's Supper which happens in worship and the strength gained by standing next to people who all believe the same thing. The confession of faith, the group absolution for sins, the songs, the offering, the joint prayers. You'd miss all of it, all more than just one hour of time spent on a Sunday morning. It's worship. Gathering to hear what Christ Jesus did for you. Gathering together to encourage one another in knowing we're not alone in what Christ did for us. It's our mission, to grow in the grace of God and one great way to do that is get connected to Christ right here every week.

I hope there's recognition you can't remain in Christ on your own. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. The vine must hold on to the branches, not the other way around. So when God comes to us in worship it's through the Means of Grace. That's what we focus on then. The baptismal font up front and centered. The Word of God proclaimed openly in three lessons and expounded on in the sermon. The gospel giving theme to our entire worship. The sacrament of Holy Communion served. Worship is about what God does for us, not what we do for God. It's about his Means of Grace. It's about enriching our souls with his gospel.

Mission and vision usually contain lofty goals that seem just beyond the reach of those trying to attain them. Batman will always try and save everyone from crime. Our mission and vision keep us striving to reach our lofty goals. But first it's got to be all about what God does for us. So we start with worship, the ongoing part of our mission because our connection with Christ can never stop. So as we think about our mission and vision over these next weeks let's always start with enriching our souls with the gospel so we always remain connected to Christ.