

8.23.2026 Trinity 12 (Mark 7:31-37)

A few weeks ago St. Joseph's Catholic church (which sits just behind our church building) was listed for sale, and the description provided in the listing troubled my heart to the point that I felt led to share it with you today. It reads like this: Charming church in Jacksonville, formerly St Joseph's Catholic church, has been decommissioned and is ready for a new purpose. Built in 1858, this historic church has seen many people pass through its doors - church services, weddings, and funerals. Inside you will find a large open space as well as a separate room in the back - the former sacristy. The church could possibly be used as a wedding chapel or event center. Due diligence is needed with City of Jacksonville as to possibilities for future use.

Since 1858, just a few years after the discovery of gold brought settlers to this area, St. Joseph's has served, not merely as it was described in the listing - as a building to conduct a church service, a wedding, or a funeral, but rather, St. Joseph's has served as a sacred space where we, the Church, come together as the Body of Christ to the end that we may commune with God at a particular location. Like the Israelites who met God at the tabernacle in the wilderness or the temple in Jerusalem, like Moses who met God at the burning bush or Jacob who met Him at Bethel, we gather at a specific, sacred location because we know that we will meet God here, in His house, at His Table.

It hurt my heart to hear the news that St. Joseph's was not only up for sale, but was ready for a new purpose because the church had been decommissioned. The term decommissioned, according to canon law, means that a building has been "relegated to profane (non-sacred) use." In a decommissioned church the altar is removed, or if it can't be removed the altar is destroyed, and all holy objects are gathered for use elsewhere. So, what was once a holy place set apart for worship and prayer, where the Word of God was proclaimed and the divine grace given through the Sacraments was received, is suddenly reduced to the status of any other ordinary building, and that fact lines up quite well with the description provided in the listing for St. Joseph's. We know that for nearly two centuries Christians have entered into the super-natural, and extra-ordinary life of God by walking through those church doors, but the future possibilities mentioned in the ad

only speak of the natural and ordinary cares of this world.

St. Joseph's is far from being the only church to suffer this fate. Over the last few decades, tens of thousands of churches in the United States and Western nations have been decommissioned and are now relegated to non-sacred use. Former sacred spaces are now retail shops, offices, restaurants, and breweries, and as I read our Gospel lesson this morning I couldn't help but wonder if so many churches would still be closing if we acted more like the people described in these verses.

The text of our Gospel passage today is an account of a group of people, perhaps friends or family, that brought a man to Jesus *"who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged Him to lay His hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, He put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, He sighed and said to him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more He charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak"* (Mark 7:32-37).

Here's a question to consider: Would tens of thousands of churches be decommissioned and sold if you and I and all who call themselves Christians were, like the people in our Gospel lesson, so *astonished beyond measure* that we couldn't help but proclaim what Christ has done?

Jesus commanded those who witnessed this miracle to tell no one, but the more He ordered them to remain silent, *the more zealously they proclaimed it*. The scene described here brings to mind Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in which we see the same reaction by those who witnessed what Christ has done. St. Luke tells us that on Palm Sunday as Jesus *"was drawing near... the whole multitude of His disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest! And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, Teacher, rebuke your disciples. He answered, I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out"* (Luke 19:37-40).

Our Lord's identity as the Promised Messiah, His glory as the Savior of the World, are so real and so astounding that you and I and all of creation must proclaim this truth. Jesus ordered the people to tell no one, and all the more zealously they proclaimed it. The Pharisees tried to silence the crowd on Palm Sunday, but if they'd remained silent even the rocks would've cried out, and these are just two examples of a pattern found throughout the New Testament in which people encounter our Lord and immediately bring others to Christ by proclaiming the Good News. Think of Andrew, who after meeting Jesus went and found his brother Simon Peter, told him, "*We have found the Messiah,*" and then brought Peter directly to our Lord (John 1:40-42), or think of the Samaritan woman, who after meeting Christ at the well was so eager to share Jesus with everyone she knew that she left her water pot behind. Entirely disregarding the reason why she'd come to the well, the woman ran to her village, and declared, "*Come, see a Man who told me all things... Could this be the Christ*" (John 4:29). Because of her they came to meet our Lord, and we learn that many from that town believed because of the woman's testimony, and many more believed because of His message.

Throughout the New Testament we read about people who encounter Christ and cannot remain silent. We often think of evangelism, sharing the good news of what our Savior Christ has done as a command given by Jesus at the end Matthew's gospel, where He told those who follow Him to "*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:19-20). We often think of evangelism as a command, but in the examples we considered, evangelism, inviting others to "*Come, see a Man,*" is simply the natural response of the person who has truly encountered Christ.

When I think of St. Joseph's, and tens of thousands of other churches that have been decommissioned and sold, I can't help but wonder if this would still be the case if you and I acted like the people in our Gospel lesson who refused to remain silent about what they'd witnessed, or the crowd that cried out when our Lord triumphantly entered Jerusalem, or the Samaritan woman who told everyone she knew about Jesus, or St. Andrew who brought his brother Peter to Christ, or a whole host of others who met our Lord and

brought others to Him. This morning we read an account of Jesus miraculously healing a man who couldn't hear or speak, and the crowd that witnessed this miracle, by the grace of God were given eyes to see, and seeing, they were *astonished beyond measure* by the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that we, like them, may use our mouths to proclaim the Good News of what God has done.