

With the Holy Family in Barcelona
Sermon by Lori Erickson
New Song Church
June 15, 2024

This morning I can't help but wish New Song had one of those big jumbotron screens like some churches have. I know, I know, it's not our style. But still, it would be useful for my sermon today.

So instead I'm going to paint a word picture for you.

Imagine you're standing outside a huge church, one with dozens of spires and towers sprouting from its roof. The outside is covered with stone carvings, from Biblical figures and botanical motifs to creatures that include snails, lizards, and snakes. Everywhere you look is some fascinating detail.

And then you step inside the church's cavernous interior, and instead of straight columns like in a typical cathedral, you see that it has columns that branch at the top like trees, so that it almost seems as if you're in a forest. There are skylights above that allow light to filter through the branches, and even more light floods the church through two walls made up almost entirely of stained glass. One wall is mostly shades of orange and red; the other is blues and greens, and as the light shifts through the day the church is bathed in a changing kaleidoscope of light.

And as if that's not enough, when you look up, the ceiling is filled with geometric designs, so complex and intricate that they draw your gaze deeper and deeper into them, almost as if it's a portal to another realm.

Some of you, maybe, have guessed the church I'm talking about because you've been there. It's called the Sagrada Familia, which means the church of the holy family, and it's in Barcelona, Spain. Bob and I visited it in April, and I'm still trying to make sense of what we saw there.

I'm telling you about it this morning because I think it relates to both Father's Day—that's the holy family part—and to the gospel reading for today, which is all about the power of small seeds. In the words of Jesus:

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

The Sagrada Familia is an example of what can grow from a small seed. The church was founded in 1882 by a Catholic lay order devoted to St. Joseph. The order wanted to be sure that their new church, which bore the name of Holy Family, prominently featured Joseph. They loved him in part because Joseph is the patron saint of workers. At a time when the

working class was often terribly exploited in Spain, Joseph was viewed as a model for the dignity of manual labor. He was their guy, and they loved him for it.

We know only a few things about Joseph. The most important is that when he learned that Mary was pregnant before their marriage, he didn't cast her aside, as would have been allowed under Jewish law, but instead loved and cherished both her and the baby. He also taught Jesus a trade that supported him before he became a wandering rabbi.

While Joseph looms large in the Sagrada Familia, so does another man: its primary architect, Antoni Gaudi. The son of a coppersmith, he was often sickly as a child and spent a lot of time outside, keenly observing nature. In 1870 he moved to Barcelona to study architecture, where he was a brilliant but odd student. When he graduated from architectural school, the school's director said, "We have given this degree to either a madman or a genius. Only time will tell."

Gaudi designed other buildings than the Sagrada Familia, but it was the church that became his lifework. For 43 years he labored on its construction, creating a building filled with organic forms inspired by nature.

Though Gaudí's church was dedicated to the Holy Family, his own family life was fractured. He was unlucky in love and never married. After the death of his sister, he took care of his alcoholic niece, who died while living with him. In the later decades of his life, his closest ties were with those who worked with him, whom he treated with respect and kindness.

Gaudí's deepening commitment to his faith was likely surprising to those who knew him as a young man, when he'd been something of a dandy, with gourmet tastes and irregular church attendance. But during the course of his life—especially once he devoted himself to the Sagrada Familia—he began to follow an increasingly ascetic and devout lifestyle. In the last months of his life he lived in a small studio next to his workshop, essentially living a monastic existence that included daily mass and confession.

Despite the revolutionary nature of his designs, Gaudí considered himself part of the tradition of medieval cathedral architects. He hoped that when people contemplated the Sagrada Familia, they would find a path to spiritual truth. And because he viewed God as his boss, he was in no hurry to complete the church. When criticized for the slow pace of its construction, he told critics that his client was not in a rush.

By the time Gaudi died in 1926 at the age of 73, only part of the church was completed, but he left models and plans that subsequent architects would follow.

The survival of the basilica after his death is almost miraculous. Severely damaged in the Spanish Civil War, it also endured through two world wars and often-bleak economic conditions. Funded entirely by donations and entrance fees, it's slowly risen, its dramatic towers rising above the skyline of Barcelona. Today it's one of the most visited churches in the world.

Since returning from Spain, I've thought about the lessons I've learned from the Sagrada Familia and from Gaudi, who is on the path to sainthood in the Catholic church.

--One, I think, is that the Kingdom of God is indeed like a mustard seed. In Barcelona, that seed took the form of an eccentric architect, a man devoted to God and to his unique vision that blends architecture with the beauties of nature.

--Another lesson is that seeds require patience. It often feels like nothing is happening, or that it's growing in misshapen ways. Just wait, God tells us. Don't be in such a hurry.

--A third lesson is that maybe we should pay more attention to the Holy Family. Gaudi's own life shows the difficulties of human families, which we of course are familiar with. But I love imagining how as a boy, Jesus was shaped by both his mother and father, who comforted him when he was hurt, encouraged him, and gave him a foundation for the work he was meant to do. No matter how dysfunctional our families of origin, the Holy Family can inspire us.

--And the final lesson, I think, is about the power of art. I love our cozy little church, but if you're like me, every so often you need a jolt of magnificence. Maybe you've had the sense, too, of stepping inside a cathedral or a basilica and being overwhelmed by a sense of the Holy Spirit.

This makes me think of a conversation I had with a woman at a pickleball game a year or so ago. After she asked what I did for a living, she told me that she had no interest in religion, having been alienated by Christianity in her childhood. "It just doesn't work for me," she said, then she paused. "But you know, something strange happened to me when my husband and I were on a trip to Paris years ago. One day we visited Notre Dame Cathedral, and as soon as we stepped inside, I started crying. I cried the entire time we were inside. I had no idea why—in fact, I still don't. I even went back a few days later, just to see what would happen, and the same thing happened again."

A moment later she left to rejoin her game, leaving me thinking of a host of things I could have said to her. The cathedral was calling to you, I might have said. Maybe there's more to that religion stuff than you realize. I've never seen her again, but her story has stayed with me because to me it encapsulates the power of a holy place. Even if you aren't interested in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is interested in you—and sacred art has the power to break through even the most hardened shell around our souls.

So I invite you to go home and do a web search on the Sagrada Familia. Browse the pictures of it, and as you do so, think of other places that have overwhelmed you with beauty. And remember that God is good at using absolutely everything to draw us to him. He uses pain and difficulties, and also magnificent sunsets and beautiful mountains. He uses men and women who are peculiar, who don't fit in, but who nevertheless create astounding beauty. And he's patient, because the Kingdom of God is a slow-growing seed that's worth the wait.

