

A Sermon for the
5th Sunday after Pentecost
June 15, 2008
Text: Matthew 9:35-10:23

“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’ Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness....These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of God has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave the house or town.” Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5-14

Up to this point in Matthew’s story of Jesus’ ministry, it has been a one man show. Jesus being born, Jesus being baptized, Jesus coming out in Galilee taking up a ministry of preaching about the arrival of the kingdom of God, Matthew prefers kingdom of heaven, a ministry of teaching, offering a new authoritative interpretation of God’s teachings, and a ministry of healing, a sign of kingdom being near. And it’s a summary of all of this that Matthew offers at the beginning of our gospel reading today. “Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease, and every sickness.” Jesus has been a very busy man. Word about him has spread far and wide, there were large crowds who would seek him out.

Then it feels like Jesus pauses in the midst of all this busyness and looks around. He looks at the crowds, and he had compassion for them. The word for compassion there actually describes a visceral reaction, a feeling of sympathetic pain and suffering deep down in your guts. Jesus was moved to the core of his being, because of the mass of wounded and hurting people before him. Harassed and helpless is what our translation says. They were like sheep who had no shepherd to care for them.

I have often wondered when reading this passage what Jesus would see if he were to stand in our world and look around. Which is not quite a rhetorical question, since he does stand in our world and look around, just as we do. And from my vantage point, the view today hasn't changed very much. Harassed, helpless, wounded, hurting, pretty well describes much of what we see around today too. Jesus chose to picture what he saw with the image of a harvest. A bountiful harvest of need. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," is what Jesus said. I will say the laborers were few, one to be exact, as Matthew's story was describing it.

Jesus is looking around at all of the need crying out for compassion, and realizes, "I'm going to need some help here." So he turns to his disciples and says, "Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest - God - to send more laborers into the harvest." This provides an interesting lesson in the power of prayer, or, if you have a bit of a cynical streak, a lesson in watching out what you pray for. For Jesus, having just asked his disciples to start praying for helpers to go out into this harvest of need, prayers which I'm sure they had already begun to diligently offer, turns to the special twelve, and says to them, "The Lord has answered our prayers, so good of you to go." Oftentimes the power of prayer is manifested not in what they manage to get God to do, but in what they manage to get us to do. Prayer is not so much about changing God's mind, but changing ours.

Jesus needed help, the level of need out there was just too enormous for one man to handle alone. It seems to me it would make sense that the most capable and qualified candidates would be found to be sent out to engage in this work. Jesus summons the twelve, among them four fisherman, one so impetuous that he was likely to say or do most anything, another who had frequent serious doubts, a tax collector just two steps away from the tax booth, a revolutionary recently recruited from the band of Zealots, and Judas who would one day turn Jesus in to the authorities. This is the coalition of the ordinary and the unqualified.

This should give all of us pause, I think, when we try to say we are not qualified or prepared to undertake this or that ministry. The twelve apostles were ordinary people like you and I. It was Jesus who qualified them to go out and undertake his mission. You will do the same thing I do he told them. You will go and proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and through word and action you will make visible the love, the hope, the compassion that are the hallmarks of God's presence. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. How can we do that? Well, we can try to insure that those who are sick receive and use the proper medical care. We can help those who feel their whole life is gone, lost in a flood or a tornado or an earthquake. Help them to experience new life beyond the dead end their life has been caught up in. We can seek acceptance and inclusion for those treated like lepers, outcasts, people who are shunned or excluded because of their race, or religion, or sexual orientation, or mistakes they made at an earlier time in their lives. We can help cast out the demons of shame, guilt, self-hatred, by offering the message of forgiveness, of God's steadfast love, of Jesus' welcome to all as brothers and sisters.

The harvest is plentiful and the Lord of the harvest is sending out workers, those he has gathered about him, his disciples, and that means us. One writer noted when studying this text that Jesus didn't send out his disciples on a mission to start an institution, with buildings to maintain, with hierarchies and privileges to protect, he sent them out on a mission to bring good news and healing to the harassed and hurting of the world. Which brought me back to an article

I encountered recently and reprinted in the newsletter this month. Written by church consultant Don Hotchkiss, it was entitled “Who Owns a Congregation?” In there he writes, “A congregation exists to serve its owner, which is not its members, or its governing board, or the larger church institution. You could say Jesus, or God, is the owner, but, he says, “the more useful answer is the owner of the congregation is its mission. The congregation exists to serve its mission.”

A major aspect of the mission is articulated in the gospel today. To go out into the plentiful harvest of need. When the mission owns or governs the congregation our vision is kept outward looking on the world Jesus had compassion for, which is to say not turned in on ourselves, serving ourselves, serving the institution. It is to collectively practice the kind of discipleship Jesus taught his disciples to follow. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who give away their life for my sake will find it.” If a congregation needs to find its life, then turning outward in mission, not inward in self-preservation, is where life is to be found.

We have been prepared for mission, in whatever form that may take. For we have experienced Jesus coming to us in our need with his loving presence, with God’s forgiveness, with the power of the Holy Spirit to encourage and transform our lives, with fellow disciples in mutual love and consolation. Through our experience of love, forgiveness, hope, and healing we are prepared to be sent out, both as individuals and as a community, to be the compassionate hearts and hands of Jesus. As we undertake Jesus’ mission, then we and the congregation will find our life. Amen