

4th Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2017

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Mount Olive Lutheran Church

Theme: The Harvest Is Plentiful
Part I: Ask for Workers
Part II: Answer the Call

Text: **Matthew 9:35 – 10:8**

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

10 He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

In their most recent study the Pew Research Center reported that of the over 7 billion people on earth roughly 30 % of them are Christian. The most recent estimates put the number of total deaths on this planet at about 150,000 people per day... or an average of 2 people each second... If you do the math that means that in the next five seconds... 1...2...3...4...5... 10 people just died... and 7 of them went to hell.

We only have one life. And when it's over it won't matter how much money we made, how many kids we had, how many people knew us or will remember us... the only thing that will matter is whether or not we knew who Jesus was and trusted in him for our forgiveness and eternal life.

Jesus once told a man: **God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:17-18).**

You do not stand condemned before God. That is the good news Jesus not only preached, but earned through a perfect life lived in your place and his innocent death on your behalf. You are not condemned. No matter your past sins, your presents sins, your future sins... no matter what

struggles you have, no matter how rich or poor, no matter what... God has forgiven you. God loves you for the sake of Jesus. And so when you die, your soul will go immediately to be with the Lord. And your body will rise to eternal life when Christ returns on the Last Day. This is the good news you believe. There is nothing that could ever compete with this as the most important thing in your life.

And yet this good news about Jesus was not something you figured out on your own. Someone told you. God tells us in his Word: **how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:14)**. The answer is... They can't. We can't. Without a messenger, we'd never hear the only message that can rescue us from the hell we deserve. I'd like you to pause for just a few seconds right now and think about the people that God used... the people God placed in your life to bring the gospel – the good news about Jesus – into your life. I'll give you a few moments to think about those people right now.

I thought about my mother and grandmother... my grade school teachers... my confirmation pastor... my high school, college, and seminary professors... my brothers in the ministry today... Without these messengers, and many others, I would not know Christ like I do today.

What about you? Can you see their faces? Your mother and father who brought you to the baptismal font... who brought you to worship and Sunday school... your grandmother who read you Bible stories and prayed for you each day... your teachers who held back tears as they saw you grow in faith right before their very eyes... your pastors who helped you understand God's grace in new and refreshing ways... your friends who showed you what family really meant by welcoming you into God's family... your family who never gave up praying for you and encouraging you with God's Word even when you turned your back on them. Without these messengers, and many others, you would know Christ like you do today.

1...2...3...4...5... because of them, you're one of the 30% who will live with God in heaven forever when your time on earth ends. God be praised.

But what about the other 70%? There's work to be done, isn't there. There are souls to reach. Ears that need to hear. Hearts that need to be changed. Jesus saw this in his own day... and *he* got to work. The first thing we hear, in fact, in our sermon text today is that: **Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:35-36)**

Jesus went to work. He preached the good news. He helped people with their physical needs, so he could address their greater spiritual needs. He didn't see the crowds of unbelievers and think of them as a hopeless mass. He saw them as people. People who were harassed by their own sin and by how they had been taught to deal with it... trying to fix things on their own... trying to earn God's favor... but never able to do enough. He saw them as helpless. They had no one to lead them to the truth. No one to care for them. To feed them with the bread of life. They were

like sheep without a shepherd. But even though they were harassed and helpless... things were not hopeless. Jesus also saw them for what they were... a spiritual harvest just waiting to be gathered in. A flock of lost sheep that belonged in his sheep pen, but just didn't know it yet... And so he shepherded them. He fed them with the gospel and led them to know peace with God through faith in him.

But he would not do this alone. In fact the very next thing we hear is that Jesus **said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."** (Matthew 9:37-38). The harvest was plentiful. And that meant that there was work to be done. So Jesus told his followers to ask for workers... to pray that God would equip and send people to share the good news of forgiveness and freedom through Christ. And you know what, God answered that prayer for workers. In fact, he answered it by calling on the people who were praying to get to work!

The very next thing we hear is how Jesus calls the 12 to him and sends them out to help people with their physical needs and most importantly with their greatest need as they preached the good news of God's kingdom to those they met. Jesus told them: **Freely you have received, freely give.** (Matthew 10:8). The power to help others and the gospel to set them free from sin and death was something Jesus had given his followers free of charge. And now they were sent out to give it freely to others too.

My friends, I don't think it's too difficult to see the harassed and helpless who are all around us today. The people worn down by the difficulties of this life... ready to give up because they don't see any reason to hope... the people trapped in sin... caught up in pride or despair because they've bought the lies of the world that tell them their identity is found in their popularity, their bank account, their sexuality... anything but in God who longs to delight in them and call them his own. Yes there is a harvest waiting. 1...2...3...4...5... There are souls dying. And the Master calls for you.

He calls for you to pray for workers first of all... to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers still today... to pray for your sons and daughters, your grandchildren, the children of this congregation – to pray that they might scorn earthly wealth and fame and consider serving as full time pastors and teachers and missionaries in the Lord's harvest field. Pray for this. Talk about this together with them. And encourage them to pray about it too.

And as you pray, remember that the Lord often will answer that prayer by calling on you to be the response to your own prayers. Think of the apostles! They prayed for workers, and then were sent out as the workers. What will that look like for you? It might mean you leave the relaxation of retirement to share the gospel abroad by working as an ESL teacher in China, Vietnam, or Pakistan. It might mean you leave behind a career that is going well to become a second career pastor or teacher here at home. It might mean going to college at MLC instead of University of Wisconsin.

But becoming a full time gospel messenger in the public ministry is not the only way to answer God's call for workers in his harvest field. The leader of Jesus' 12 apostles, Simon Peter, knew that. In fact in his 1st New Testament letter he talked about the role every Christian had to play

whether they were in public ministry or not. He wrote: **you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9).**

So what does “declaring God’s praises” look like if you are not a pastor or teacher? Well think about the harassed and helpless people in your life that need a friend. Someone who will listen. Someone who will help them with their physical needs. And best of all, someone who won’t shy away from talking about the one thing needful whenever the opportunity arises. And if you really are having a hard time thinking of people like that to help... pray that God brings those people into your life... or talk to one of your pastors about it. We’ll connect you with people and places that will offer opportunities to share Jesus.

And finally don’t discount the many ways you can support the people who share this message full time. Remember Jesus told his disciples: **Freely you have received, freely give. (Matthew 10:8).** As they did their work they were not to hold back the gospel until someone had paid up. God’s grace through Christ is free and unearned. And yet, for us who have tasted of God’s incredible gift... who know the treasures of his mercy... we will do all we can to support those who go out to share it with this world. In fact Jesus himself, in the very next verse after our text ends, told his disciples that when they went out they should accept a living from the people who gave to support their work. He said: **Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. (Matthew 10:9-10).**

Worth his keep... and what exactly does that mean? A pastor, not me, but a pastor in our circles was once asked by his church council to tell them how much he thought his services were worth. He answered, “I teach you the Word of God. I baptize your babies. I serve you the Lord’s body and blood. If you are going to pay me what all that is worth, you couldn’t begin to afford me.” Now... he wasn’t trying to be arrogant... and I’m not quoting him to get a raise! The point is simply that it’s futile to try to put a dollar value on Gospel ministry. Knowing Jesus and making him known to others is our number one goal this side of heaven. And so everything we do will reflect that.

The bottom line is that there are souls dying every second. 1...2...3...4...5... the harvest is plentiful... and Jesus is calling... calling you to pray for workers and to answer his call to serve. No matter your role on the harvest team, the mission is the same and urgency must be the same... We have been called out of darkness of sin and unbelief and into the marvelous light of our Savior’s forgiveness. Shine in the darkness my friends. The harassed and helpless are all around you... the harvest is waiting to be gathered in. Freely you have received, freely give. Amen.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).