

June 18. Third Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 9:35—10:8 [9-23]

35Then 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. 36When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; 38therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

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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. 2These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

5These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ 8Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

[9Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. 11Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. 12As you enter the house, greet it. 13If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words,

shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. 15Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

16“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; 18and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. 19When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; 22and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.]

SERMON-

Sheep without a shepherd have it bad enough. Jesus feels the gut punch when he sees wolves playing shepherd so they can eat lamb chops. Spoiler alert: Jesus doesn't call for more shepherds or even better ones. He shifts the scene entirely. He calls labourers into fields ready for harvest.

Years ago, the preacher and writer Russell Rathbun started a sermon saying “words get tired. . . it's not their fault.” They fade out from over-familiarity.

Warren Carter's commentary Matthew and the Margins wakes three words—compassion, harassed, and helpless and as we enter into today's Gospel.....

Jesus sees masses of people whom the powers that be have violated and crushed and his innards roil—People from the Middle East believe that

compassion comes from the gut. You might even remember the antiquated English phrase ‘bowels of compassion’.

Jesus sees people *Harassed*— a word that can mean flaying or skinning, which sounds a lot like Roman law enforcement.

Jesus sees people who are *helpless*—a word that can mean slammed down by violence— as Pharaoh slammed down an entire people as he enslaved them to build his pyramids and palaces.

There is no way the occupying Shepherds and their cronies have the backs of the people—they lay burdens on those backs...extorting taxes to finance troops set on invading and conquering...conscripting slaves to feed the legions and the elites.

For all his teaching, announcing Good News and healing, Jesus feels his guts churn at the overwhelming need surrounding him. When he recruits help, don’t expect lots of cheerful singing of “hi ho hi ho and off to work we go”. Jesus goes full disclosure to tell the sent that the labourers were in for hard work—and for some harassment and helplessness themselves. Followers in the first century experienced harassment and helplessness in the form of political persecution even as institutions that once supported them began to crumble.

Doesn’t sound like a great gig for would-be labourers. One commentator makes a move that I’d not thought of and it injects hope into what seems an unsustainable situation. Remember our exploration of Genesis one and the poetry leading us to imagine God’s Spirit blasting into chaos to create beauty, order and harmony? Professor Matt Skinner takes that idea to describe the labourers’ life as recurring cycles in which chaos invades and where God’s Spirit blows in and compassionately acts.

God's compassion happens in microcosm a lot of the time. Maybe those parables about seed planting and mustard plants remind us how our simple acts of kindness might have eternal significance.

So Jesus asks us to pray that God would choose and send labourers. What if we're the labourers? Words we say at baptism about being co-workers in God's realm suggest that God's penchant for delegating—yes see Genesis 2 for the beginning of a pattern that extends to us.

We might feel harassed and helpless or haunted by the enormity of need, feeling like our efforts are a mosquito's belch in a hurricane or that we're cleaning roadside litter with tweezers.

I get that. I feel that. Yet I think there are questions we need to ask of ourselves as our churches grow smaller...and more tired. We want to keep going. If we take the Gospel seriously, we have to ask, "Who —besides us gathered in person and on line —benefits from our continued survival as church." Who needs us? How can we bring Good News to the harassed and helpless; even when we've got some of that going on ourselves?

There are parts of our tradition that might speak to those questions and bring this sermon to a close. The first is a quote from the Talmud. The rabbis know the world's need is enormous. We're told that while we're not obligated to finish all the work, we're not allowed to abandon it either. Second, Jesus reminds us it's God's harvest and God's world even as our job is to carry on Jesus' teaching, Good News bearing and healing.

