

## The Harvest is Great

### Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)

<sup>9:35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup> therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

<sup>10:1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> These 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; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

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

<sup>9</sup> Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> As you enter the house, greet it. <sup>13</sup> If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. <sup>14</sup> If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. <sup>15</sup> Truly I tell you; it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

<sup>16</sup> "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup> Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; <sup>18</sup> and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. <sup>19</sup> When 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; <sup>20</sup> for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. <sup>21</sup> Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; <sup>22</sup> and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>23</sup> When 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."

The crowds that is "amazed" by Jesus (9:33) are in fact the ones in most need. These crowds are everywhere (7:28; 12:23; 14:13; 21:46) but have really been getting nowhere in life because "they were harassed and helpless, like sheep

without a shepherd" (9:36). Jesus sees that they are the tired, walking wounded. Furthermore, they have no shepherd and are "lost" (10:6) because there is no one to show them the way. To be a sheep without a shepherd in the Old Testament was a way of saying that Israel had no prophet or king to look after them or to lead them in the right way (Num. 27:16-17; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:1-6). They have had no one to care for them until the real shepherd, Jesus (2:6), sees them in need. He is the one they have been looking for, and now he is looking at them. Their trouble is made explicit, and we wait to see what the shepherd's response will be to human need. What is the church's response to human need? Do we care, or could we not care less?

Jesus sees their plight and is not numb to their need. Rather, he has compassion for them (9:36). His compassion is deeply embodied, rising out of his "bowels" or "guts," which is where the word "compassion" in this context stems from. He is moved by what he sees and moves toward concrete action as a response to the needs of the people. The compassionate response of Jesus is so critical because this is what leads him to action. As a congregation, do we see needs in front of us, and do we give a compassionate response or loving mission based on the needs of people. Do we even recognize the needs staring us in the face?

The compassion of Jesus is what leads him to a call to mission. Seeing needs and a having a compassionate response to them call for faithful action. Ironically, when Jesus tells the disciples to pray that the Lord will send out laborers into the harvest (9:38), they become the answer to their own prayer. They are the ones they are praying for, reminding us that we may be the answer to our very own prayers. The disciples become the laborers in the harvest. They are summoned by Jesus and given authority (10:1). **Luke A. Powery**

Jesus makes it look easy. He goes to all the cities, preaches in all the synagogues, and cures every single ailment. No distance is too great, no audience

too skeptical, no disease too severe. Jesus gets it done. When he commissions his disciples to carry out his ministry, things get much more difficult. For anyone setting off on a new task—we can think especially of graduates leaving school or church members being commissioned for special service—these verses offer a sobering assessment of what lies ahead for those who follow in Jesus' footsteps.

The divine mission Christ gives is to be applied to this world, with its political reality, its social divisions, and its systemic disorder. Despite the challenges, despite the questionable likelihood of success, despite our inevitable difficulty in accomplishing what he could do far more easily than we, Christ confidently sends us out. This text forces us therefore to acknowledge the gap between the ideal and the real, and then to take a major leap of faith in our own discipleship.

You and I wonder if anyone apart from Jesus is up to the job. Cure the sick? Cleanse the lepers? Maybe. Cast out demons? Raise the dead? Few, if any of us, feel up to those assignments. When we consider Jesus' accomplishments with the disciples' impending task, we, as the followers of Jesus seem destined to fall short of his performance. Jesus went to all the cities and villages. Jesus preached in every synagogue. Jesus met throngs of people and cured all of their diseases.

Those early followers, as firsthand witnesses of what was possible with Christ, could very well have gone off with confidence, determination, and nerves of steel. We, however, feel more like sheep without a shepherd. As modern Christians, many of us lack the confidence to talk about our faith even with those sitting next to us in church, let alone strangers in neighboring towns. The disciples may have been willing to shake the dust off their feet and try the gospel somewhere else, but in our multicultural world we grow hesitant to approach anyone, for fear of seeming too pushy with our faith. Perhaps the original followers of Jesus had success curing diseases and performing miracles, but many of us consider our prospects of such achievements very slim indeed.

Nevertheless, just as the disciples were sent out to those towns in ancient Israel, the followers of Jesus continue to be challenged to take little more than faith out into this world and get Christ's work done. It is a world that requires much faith, and many of us wonder if we have enough to accomplish what is required. As Jesus makes the distinction between Gentiles and those in the house of Israel, we are reminded of the ongoing political divisions and cultural rifts in our world, in our nation, even within the church. As we hear of how the good news was spread effectively all those years ago, we struggle to think how we can broadcast that message in a world so overwhelmed by information, distraction, and competing ideas of truth. When the disciples are sent out and told to take nothing with them and to receive no payment, such resolve makes the modern church's relationship with wealth seem all the more disconnected from the needs of those continuing to live in poverty. We cannot but wonder what, if any, hardships we would personally be willing to undergo for our beliefs. If we view the twelve disciples as inferior substitutes for Jesus, the gap between the real and the ideal seems tremendously wide for those of us hearing this commission today.

However, we must acknowledge that throughout history, amazing things—seemingly impossible things—have been done and continue to be done through ordinary members of the church. Jesus' words have encouraged and motivated far more than the twelve disciples listed in these verses. Due in part to the efforts made by faithful Christians, diseases thought to be incurable have been eradicated, unjust laws have been overturned, and individuals who thought some doors would never open have seen them swing wide. Perhaps most humbling of all is the fact that in many parts of the world where Christians are persecuted today, Christianity not only survives but thrives.

When such accomplishments occur, they leave the faithful ascribing success to a higher power, and rightly so. It is Christ who enables us to do what we could not

do on our own. This passage leaves as a mystery why Christ includes us in his mission and how exactly we meet success through him, but the faithful do achieve miraculous things. Perhaps it is because Jesus continues to have compassion on shepherd less sheep. Perhaps it is because prayers have been answered and enough laborers have been sent out into the bountiful harvest. Perhaps the words of the Father's Spirit have been spoken through the right people at the right time.

Perhaps the followers of Christ have found the faith to see that the gap between the real and the ideal can in fact be bridged. Jesus, at least, seems to think we can get the job done, even if it will not be easy. **Alexander Wimberly**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).