

“Ask the Lord to Send Laborers of Love”

Pentecost 2, Matthew 9:35-10:8

June 14, 2020; 9:00 am

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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Matthew 9:35-10:8 The Message (MSG)

³⁵⁻³⁸ Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. “What a huge harvest!” he said to his disciples. “How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!”

The Twelve Harvest Hands

10 ¹⁻⁴ The prayer was no sooner prayed than it was answered. Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives. This is the list of the twelve he sent:

Simon (they called him Peter, or “Rock”),

Andrew, his brother,

James, Zebedee’s son,

John, his brother,

Philip,

Bartholomew,

Thomas,

Matthew, the tax man,

James, son of Alphaeus,

Thaddaeus,

Simon, the Canaanite,

Judas Iscariot (who later turned on him).

⁵⁻⁸ Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge:

“Don’t begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don’t try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.

SCRIPTURE STORY COME ALIVE!

And Jesus went all around! In all the towns and villages. Quite the walkabout! He’s obviously not in quarantine now!

He is about the work of the Kingdom: Healing *every* disease and sickness. He doesn’t stop to test with a swab or thermometer or needle. He doesn’t fill out a Questionnaire to make sure the multitudes have or don’t have certain symptoms. Doesn’t check online to

confirm enough health insurance to cover the test or treatment.

He healed them.

He went to the crowds. Met them where they were, and took care of their needs. Many needs, great and small. When he saw the crowds, “he had compassion on them.” They lacked leadership and a unified purpose. Hmmm.....

What if Jesus looked out on *our* crowds today? What would he see? What would he *do*? Would he plunge right into the middle of them? Of US? The Church? The wider world community?

Would he look with eyes of compassion and encourage us to BE the good leaders that are so needed? Direct us to work *together* to find a common, unified purpose and direction—for the good of all?

He felt compassion for them because they were “harassed and helpless.”

HARASSED AND HELPLESS

Do you ever feel harassed and helpless—like perhaps you’re working at cross-purposes with those around you? It’s easy to feel that way. Adrift, at sea in the storm of stories swirling around—not knowing what or who to believe. Not knowing which way is up?

“Harassed and helpless” is a pretty universal state! (sounds like a Country Western Song!) It’s Universal *and* Timeless. Those folks back in Jesus’ day likely felt

much like we do today—they just didn’t have the internet and the news media to add to the mix!

“Like a sheep without a shepherd,” Matthew tells us these friends and followers of Jesus were. But *we* are not! They were not either, once they figured out who was walking among them.

We are *not* helpless, hopeless and lacking in good leadership. Why? Because we have Jesus! He is moving and breathing and teaching among us, still here—in our midst. In Spirit form.

We are *not* a sheep without a shepherd, as followers of Jesus. Jesus Christ is The Shepherd for those who are on the Path of following Jesus—walking and living in the footsteps of the Master Guide.

We have the BEST guide and leader for *us*, and the marching orders are clear!

And what *did* he—does he- teach us is #1? Love our neighbors! ALL our neighbors. We’ve come full circle.

Love your neighbor, even when!

Even when feeling harassed for doing so.

Even when feeling helpless.

Even when everything we see and hear on the news leaves us feeling despondent and like we just want to throw up our hands! When it seems no one is in charge, and chaos is reigning.

It may sound trite—or over-marketed and mass-produced, but the simple tool—in *every* situation and conundrum we find ourselves and the world in, is to ask: **What Would Jesus Do?**

When it's "complicated" to really love our neighbor, in any given situation—we can step back and ask ourselves the million-shekel question: What Would Jesus Do now?

WHAT a HARVEST!

"What a huge harvest!" Jesus said to his disciples.

"How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"

What IS this harvest that Jesus speaks of so often? Matthew and the gospel writers were *not* talking about church members here! The Church hadn't even been started yet. Nor is this about Olathe Sweet corn or Palisade Peaches or Rocky Flats Cantaloupe!

What is *our* Harvest—right here, today? What is God calling us to work toward, for, in bringing in the Kingdom? Some ideas come to mind:

- *Dismantling Racism
- *Decentering Whiteness
- *"Seeing in Color" (a new phrase I learned that I love!)
- *Equality and equity for all

Getting in the same boat with Jesus—not scattered, not at cross-purposes—but committed to loving our

neighbors—one and all—and working especially hard to come alongside those on the margins.

The least of these.

Those who have been kept outside the circle by systems and beliefs that declare them "other" or "less than." Illegal, undocumented, lazy, not normal, more suspect.

We work toward the harvest, bring in the Kingdom, by:

=Challenging the centuries of systemic inequality that we have been a part of—sometimes unknowingly and sometimes willingly—though it doesn't matter *which* at the end of the day.

=Challenging the denigrating refrains and misnomers. The equivocating and "keeping under the thumb by denial" that is running rampant right now.

I don't watch the news. But I do hear refrains—just in conversations with friends and acquaintances—that make me cringe and I believe Jesus calls me to challenge:

"All (fill in the blank) _____ people in that category are like that. Do shifty things. Don't want to work for an honest wage."

"Black Lives Matter is a Leftist Lie."

"We've had equality for decades! Even centuries."

Watch for the “Lumping”: Peaceful Protesters with looters and pillagers. Civil stands for justice with organized violent extremist groups.

Janet’s sign at CUCC is a great example! It reminds us not to lump everyone together.

for some

it's a cause

for looters

it's an excuse

“People just need to get out of the hood and get themselves educated and be successful; pull themselves up by their bootstraps...” –it’s a level playing field, really!” (Hint: it’s not.)

“You have to choose—one side or the other! *Either* you’re supportive of cops, *or* you care about black people.” What an impossible choice. I, for one, completely support the millions of good and just cops *and* want to see people of color treated justly in all ways. It’s a tragedy that a few bad apples in every bunch spoil it for all.

The list of “false choices” we are presented could take a whole ‘nother sermon! Don’t let yourself be caught up in those “lesser of two evils” debates—they’re evil. And they’re *not* true debates. Fight for the right and the both/and.

Challenge the lumping. The equivocating. The excusing, the denial, the false stereotypes.

Jesus *never* commanded us to be Either/Or people! Love God with ALL you are; AND your every neighbor AND yourself. “I have come that they may have life and have it *abundantly!!*”

We can choose to live out of an abundance of everything—not scarcity. Abundant food and resources on the planet—if they are shared equitably. Abundant love, mercy and compassion. Life in the Kingdom! That’s the Harvest. What Jesus calls us to work toward and for.

Those peasants in the towns and villages that Jesus walked among, teaching, healing and showing great compassion—did NOT have a level playing field in any way. They struggled to survive every day under the thumb of an oppressive regime.

A corrupt system that would NOT let them get out from under starvation taxation and bare subsistence existence for them and their families—no matter how hard they tried. They were most definitely “harassed and helpless.”

PRAYER & ACTION

But, Jesus didn’t only pity them. He didn’t just offer “thoughts and prayers” and get back to his own business. He also didn’t try to work alone, nor did he just pray for a bigger team.

He took action. Challenged the system. Spoke truth to power. Stood up in solidarity and support with those oppressed. Had compassion on ALL he saw and

heard—didn't choose one group over another, as if it's a competition!

STEP 1: Gather Round:

Hey guys! We gotta DO something here. Just feeling sorry for these people, band-aiding their immediate presenting symptoms and trying not to get in the middle of the messiness is not enough!

It doesn't cut it to heal their physical wounds and then step back and watch from the sidelines while they get wounded again.

STEP 2: Prayer Meeting!

We need Divine Guidance. WHILE we do something. Prayer AND action. We need to assess the situation, the need and the suffering of our brothers and sisters, pray for the Lord to send more workers and show us the way!

STEP 3 – Action Plan!

Jesus calls the 12 disciples to him and gives all his authority away! What a good leader does! He gives them the power, the authority and clear instructions:

“Kick out the evil spirits and tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives.” *Every* kind of disease and sickness. Body and soul.

Not just the popular kinds. The familiar ones. Covid, discrimination, cancer, death-dealing policies.

Then he NAMES the disciples—one by one. Does he name us? Is your name on that list? Will you answer

the call? Be called out—Be the Church—in courageous ways that count?

(Judas is on that list. He answered the call originally, but then got swayed by the system later...back into bigotry, bought out, motivated by greed. We must be cautious in ourselves—what are the “10 Pieces of silver” that tempt us to abandon the good fight and give in to the oppressive system and denial? What renders us silent and effective no more?)

LORD, START WITH US!

Our calling is not to feel guilt, futility and helplessness, but look inside ourselves, first, at the parts of us that are asleep, unaware and unconcerned about our neighbors that Jesus commands us to love.

To do the vital work of self-reflection. Study our assumptions, biases, stereotypes and uninformed conclusions.

That's Step 1. Then Step 2—get inside the shoes, and behind the eyes and hearts of those whose experience in and of the world is different from ours—either due to the amount of pigment in their skin, their socio-economic background, where they were born, their sexual orientation or gender expression—or *anything* that makes their life experience and history different from ours and Seek to Understand.

Recognizing, while we do this, that we will never understand fully—we do not have the capacity to do that as faulty human beings—and should not even

pretend we do. But we DO have the capacity to feel and show *compassion as* we seek deeper and better understanding of our neighbors' journey.

LORD, SEND US WORKERS! HERE WE ARE

“Here I Am, Lord”

God has heard his people crying in the night
We have heard God calling in the night.
Who will go? Who will respond to God's people's pain?
Is it I, Lord?
It is Us, Lord?

Are *we* the workers you are calling out, sending in?
Are you opening *our* mouths and strengthening *our*
feet to stand, walk alongside and support our
neighbors in bigger, louder and braver ways than we
ever have before?

We have heard you, Lord! We have prayed for you to
send workers for the harvest, and now we know:
It. Is. US!
Amen.