

Sermon for Proper 6A
Sunday, June 18, 2023
“The harvest truly is great”

Text: Matthew 9:35 – 10:23

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few.” When I told my mother the subject of what I was supposed to preach on this week, she reminded me that my grandfather used to say that verse all the time. And *that* brought back memories of the church I grew up in where my grandfather was the pastor; all over the church and the parish hall there were signs posted on several walls for everyone to see: “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few. Matthew 9:37.” What was Jesus talking about when he said this to his growing crowd of followers?

By this point in Jesus’s early ministry, he had been very busy. After forty long, grueling days fasting in the wilderness and being tempted, he knew what his mission was and he re-entered public life hitting the ground running. He drew a sizeable crowd when he gave his famous Sermon on the Mount. Afterward, he traveled throughout the region of Galilee “teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” (Matthew 5:23) A great many people followed him as he went from place to place. He taught them how to pray and gave them what we now know as The Lord’s Prayer. He gave them models for happy living, teaching them not to worry about things beyond their control. When he finished his sermon, he and his growing band of followers came down from the mountain and went from town to town where Jesus cured lepers, cured the servant of a Roman army commander from a distance simply because of the centurion’s faith, and cast out demons from a man and sent them into a herd of swine. He healed a paralytic man, then a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and brought the daughter of the leader of a synagogue back to life. He restored the sight of two blind men and caused a mute man to speak. And he didn’t stop! Jesus went on throughout “all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.” (Matthew 9:35)

But today’s gospel reading says that “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36) People were hurting. People were suffering. People felt helpless and hopeless. Jesus had a whole lot more work to do and a whole lot more people to help and a whole lot more advice to give. It was a lot for one man to do, and he realized that he could not do it alone. The harvest was, indeed, plentiful. He realized that so much more could be accomplished, so many more people could be helped if he brought in some more people to help him in his mission.

That’s when he decided to create his team. He called twelve men who were his closest followers, who had chosen to leave their various occupations to travel with Jesus and assist him in doing his mission. He chose people from all walks of life; among them

were fishermen, a physician, and a tax collector. He gave these twelve men the authority to do the same miraculous things that he had been doing “to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” And he encouraged them not worry about how they were going survive, but just to take a leap of faith, go forth, and do the work they were being called to do. “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.”

That observation still rings true to this day. People are still hurting. People all around are still suffering. Look at what we hear on the news or read on the internet: folks are in despair, people are losing hope, we are all feeling in some way helpless and not sure what tomorrow will bring. What is the harvest, and who are the laborers? We are among the harvest, and we are among the laborers, too. The twelve men that Jesus called to help him in his mission were people just like you and I. They had real lives, real joys, real sorrows, and real struggles; yet, Jesus called them to help in his mission to teach, preach, and heal.

So, how are we supposed to do that? Most of us aren’t going to quit our jobs and sell our homes to follow a guy around all day long. We have lives and livelihood, we have families, and we have real-world obligations. But, when we were baptized, we were adopted into a family which we call the Body of Christ, and we took vows at that time, which we renewed at our confirmation, to become laborers in the the midst of the harvest. What does it mean for us in today’s world to be the laborers who go into the vineyard and tend to the harvest? I don’t have the answers, but maybe I can offer some suggestions.

Where do you see people in need? Start with the people who are close by. What’s going on in your own homes, in your families? Today, we are honoring the fathers and father figures in our lives. Dads, are you listening to your children? Are you supporting them as they grow and learn how to be fruitful human beings in this world? Are you teaching them the things they need to know? Are you there for your adult children as they live their own lives and make decisions for themselves and maybe their own families? Spouses, are you supporting your partners? Are you communicating and being honest with each other, expressing how you feel and what you need? And if you’re going through troubled times, are you seeking advice? If your own house is not in order, you aren’t going to be as effective in helping somebody else. That doesn’t mean you can’t tend to the needs of others—many of us like to ignore our problems and keep ourselves busy trying to solve other people’s problems—but it sure makes life a heck of a lot more pleasant if we’re in good relationship with the people who are closest to us.

Where are the needs in our communities? What’s happening with our neighbors, with the people in our neighborhoods? What needs harvesting and where can we provide the labor? That’s something we can think about here in our church community. A few months ago, I suggested that we consider launching another feeding program where we offer to-go meals to anybody in need. I see a lot of people when I walk along Jamaica Avenue who would probably appreciate a boxed lunch every now and again. And I’ve met not a few people for whom I’ve bought a sandwich from one of the delis

on Jamaica Avenue. Just this week, Episcopal Ministries of Long Island sent out emails begging churches in our diocese to seek their advice in starting new ministries and asking them for grant money to get the ball rolling. Let's do this. The harvest is plentiful.

I also see, when I look out my office window, people enjoying our nice lawn with their kids—especially as the weather gets warmer. We are still lacking in ministering to children and youth—our own members of this parish and those out in the community. What are we going to do about that? There are a lot of kids out there. I keep hearing that we don't have kids in this church, but that's just not true. Even if we have only one—but we have many more than that, believe me—we need to be stepping up to our responsibility as baptized adults and tending to that harvest. And there are a lot of kids in the neighborhood, too. Is there something we can do to reach out to them? I've been encouraging community groups to seek us out as a place to meet, like a scouts group or an after-school program. So far, nobody's taken me up on the offer. And, we've never had a Vacation Bible School for the ten summers that we've been here in Woodhaven. But, maybe we can work on putting one together for next summer. The harvest truly is great and the laborers are few.

We do have other ministries here in this place that are already tending to the harvest. What do you feel called to do? What might be gnawing at you inside that might help advance God's kingdom here? What needs do you see around that need be tended to so that you can take your place as a laborer in God's vineyard and tend to the harvest? If you're not sure how to start, follow Jesus's advice and ask the Lord of the harvest. Pray to God to help you discern what your purpose in life is and show you how you can help out around here and participate in ministry here at All Saints. Discernment always starts with God, but also involves others seeing a call in you. God often uses other people as his voice; if someone else tells you you might be good at something, might be God speaking to you through them.

As Christians, members of Christ's body, we don't go it alone. Jesus knew he couldn't fulfil his mission by himself, and neither should we. The harvest truly is great; let's find more laborers. Amen.