

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 9:35-10:14

When you think of the word harvest, what do you think of? Do you have an image or a particular memory? Harvest is the gathering-in of crops, the gathering of that “fruit” broadly speaking. Harvesting was a gradual process in our garden this year. Hudson, for example, goes out to the garden each morning and pulls one carrot, feeds the tops to the bunny, and puts it in his lunch. We ate tomatoes right along until threat of frost, when Holly started making pots of marinara sauce. But that is about as dramatic as it got for us.

When I think of harvest, I have a couple memories. One is of the farm stand down the road from the church I pastored in Catskill, NY. As the year passed, you would see waves of produce come through. Around June, it would be all the strawberries, and when the corn would start, there would be mounds of corn, and as fall approached gourds and squash and pumpkins. As each crop started to produce, you would see some of it, and then it would all come ready, and there would be mounds of it.

The other memory is from growing up when we grew hay on a couple occasions. We did not have a farm, but my dad grew up on one. So he would dabble with raising the occasional cow or pig. We raised chickens every year. And for a time, we grew hay. And my memory is that there was very little involvement with the hay beyond the planting phase. But there comes the point when it is ready, or at least at a moment when it can be cut, and you watch the weather to time things because once you start, you have to follow the process through lest the hay gets too wet and molds laying in the field. So, when the time comes, it is all hands on deck. The harvest is there to be gathered; it is a question of getting it in.

So Jesus’ use of this agricultural reference strikes me here. The harvest is plentiful, the laborers few. This passage doesn’t develop or draw at length on agricultural imagery like the vine and branches passage or the parable of the sower. But Jesus associates the harvest with his ministry just as he will equip and send out his disciples into this harvest field. To say the harvest is plentiful seems to suggest he sees an opportune moment; he sees something developing, and the potential is not in question. The question is whether anyone will respond to the all hands on deck call to go out and respond to the moment.

But here is why I say Jesus' use of the language of harvest strikes me here. He associates going out to harvest with going out to minister to the needy. When you go out to harvest, it is somewhat clear that there is produce everywhere to be picked. What he seems to be looking out at feels anything but clear and hopeful, at least not to us. He is looking out at the world that is harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd. The world of pain and disfunction, people hurting, people divided. We might aptly describe our own world in such a way. But I have to say, when I think about the harassed and helpless world, full of every conflict, dilemma, and disease, I am not usually overwhelmed with hope and possibility. How about you? Do you watch the news or hear about someone's challenges and think, the harvest fields are ready? It's enough to be discouraged, to retreat into our smaller worlds in search of some serenity.

Matthew writes, "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. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'"

Jesus surveys such a scene and articulates a vision of hope and possibility, about a rich harvest that is only in need of laborers. What might turn us away, draws him. He goes out, and he meets the needs and connects with and heals the hurting. But Jesus, after all, is the messiah. On that basis, I'm tempted to let the rest of us off the hook by saying that is Jesus, not us. We can't be expected to do what Jesus does.

The problem is the next thing Jesus does is prepare and send out his disciples to do the same types of things. "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." No pressure, fellas, go get 'em!

Now there are a couple points of contextualization I would like to make concerning Jesus' commission to the disciples here. The first is the commission here is to go only to the lost house of Israel, to go only to Jews. Within the trajectory of the gospels and the Acts of the apostles that the apostles, the gospel begins within Judaism. They take the gospel first to the Jews. Whenever Paul enters a town, he always starts with the local synagogue. But Paul then preaches to the gentiles, and we see in the story of Cornelius in Acts a dramatic extension of the gospel to all non-Jews, where a second Pentecost of sorts happens as the Spirit falls on uncircumcised believers.

The second point is that in the ancient near east, there was a real focus on spirits, exorcism, and other forms of ritual to heal illness and disease. And many things we attribute to other causes, like drinking bad water, they might attribute to spirits. So, there is a focus on casting out demons and healing every disease. My point is that this is their cultural and contextual experience and understanding were different than ours. So when I think of Jesus sending us out today, I don't think we are going to be doing exorcisms and casting out disease in the same way. But what is consistent and true is that Christ affects life in the real world. We have our own brokenness and needs that leave us frantic. We have our own problems that lead to isolation and devastation. Our times are in equal need of the practical help that relying on Christ brings.

Additionally, while we may focus on the physical descriptions, there is always an intertwined social and societal aspect. The crowds Jesus is responding to who are diseased and sick, possessed and lame, are also marked by social stigmas and seen as bringing this on themselves by their own sins. And because these conditions were connoted with sin and with uncleanness, these people are excluded from God's grace in the temple, from God's grace expressed in gathered communities. These are children of God who have been excluded and pushed away, and Jesus sees them as such, seeking to gather and reconnect them.

So our context is different. Our cultural situation is different. And yet, the world is still harassed and helpless, full of angst and need, loneliness, and isolation, and so forth. Our times are in equal need of the practical help that relying on Christ brings. At least I believe so. Do you?

The problem is, it seems to me, the world has changed so much, that we aren't always sure what to do. The place and shape of the church in the world or in a particular community has shifted a great deal. And so it is all disorienting and confusing and perhaps a bit discouraging. We may start to feel very small and overwhelmed. Where Jesus sees a great harvest to be gathered, we see chaos, and we long for older and more familiar times when we knew what to do.

It is overwhelming. No less overwhelming, I imagine, than being a disciple and told you are going to go into new communities and cast out demons and heal people who have been infirmed their whole lives. And they may say, we are not trained for this, we are not qualified for this? We have no idea what to do or how to go about all this. And Jesus says, in his own way, well that is not exactly true. You do know something about how to go about this.

This brings me to one more point of contextualization about our passage. You see, the language of verses nine to fourteen is all about middle-eastern hospitality, which they know and understand. Jesus says to them that they will go in a way that makes them dependent on being received into homes and fed by new acquaintances. “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 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.” The word worthy here really means fitting or appropriate, meaning whoever responds to a traveler or visitor appropriately as custom would have them. So, Jesus is making them reliant on the tradition of hospitality.

Why is this important? Because hospitality is a set of back and forth gestures intended to forge friendships and relationships between strangers – friendships and relationships one can rely on in the future. It brings people together. I think with this passage we tend to focus on the shaking of the dust off of your feet to those that don’t receive. That can happen, but it is not the norm. Yes, one might be refused hospitality, which is a cultural breach of protocol, and if it happens, you shake the dust off your feet and you keep moving. But it is a breach, it is rude and frowned upon, as is coming into a town and preaching at people you don’t know. So, the protocol is that you get to know them through hospitality, sitting in their homes and being served. And you are likely to avoid much of the shaking off the dust of your feet by not being a jerk.

I emphasize these things, because it feels like an appropriate return to relationships, connection, and compassion in a culture that seems to grow increasingly rude and divisive and isolated. Because while the world can be overwhelming, we might be called to enter it in a similar way, with the vulnerability of wanting to be received and to connect. Coming together with each other and with those outside the church with the same openness and mutual needs is not a benign act.

Yes, the world is overwhelming. The realities of sustaining a church are overwhelming. But perhaps we know something of how to do Christ’s work, even as the disciples did. It begins in love and compassion and being open in our vulnerability. These attributes may not look flashy on a brochure, but it does describe someone we want to host in our homes, does it not?

So, if we know something of how to do Christ’s work, even as the disciples did, maybe we have just lost sight of the harvest. Because the harvest means to see the signs, and to respond to that all-hands-on-deck moment. The disciples went out together. And together, each following the call, they made a difference.

Our stewardship theme for today is recommitting. Because if we can see that God has work for us to do, if we can look out and see amid the needs a harvest potential, we might respond to that all hand on deck moment. Otherwise, the produce, the possibility, will lay in the field unrealized. But in the metaphor of the harvest, one person can't make it happen alone. It takes the community coming together. As Jesus said, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

So as we anticipate a future year in the church's life during this time of stewardship, I ask you to consider these questions. Do you see the harvest? And will you be one of those laborers who hears the call saying, the time is now? Let us come together in this work.

## Matthew 9:35- 10:14

### *The Harvest Is Great, the Laborers Few*

*(Lk 10:2–3)*

<sup>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.”

### *The Twelve Apostles*

*(Mk 3:13–19a; Lk 6:12–16)*

**10** 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.

### *The Mission of the Twelve*

*(Mk 6:6b–13; Lk 9:1–6)*

<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. <sup>11</sup> 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.