

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Home Mission Festival ✠

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Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.””

Matthew 9:35-38 NIV

No one ever said that mission work was easy work. It wasn't for Jonah. It wasn't for Jesus or his disciples. It wasn't easy for the Apostle Paul and his traveling companions. One of the biggest difficulties in mission work is simply that there's more work than we will ever be able to do. We have limited resources and a seemingly unlimited amount of work to be done. And so decisions have to be made, sometimes difficult decisions. Do we start a new mission here, or there? Do we keep working in this area or do we go somewhere else? How long do we keep trying? How long can we keep trying? These are tough choices – decisions that can have a life-changing impact on the missionaries and on the people among whom missionaries are working.

I can just imagine some members of a mission board (who makes these kind of decisions) wishing that Jesus would come down and give us some sort of hint, some sort of direction for *his* work that we are trying to do. If only Jesus could make these decisions for us, then we would know we're going in the right direction.

Jesus did that for his first missionaries, his disciples. He told them where to go and what to bring along. But Jesus hasn't promised to do that for us. Yet Jesus has not left us without direction. In this text from Matthew's Gospel, **JESUS DIRECTS HIS DISCIPLES' MISSION WORK**. This is direction that we can use even today. Let us hear how Jesus directs us: 1) **to see the shortage in an abundant harvest** and 2) **to seek the solution from the Lord of the harvest**.

Jesus says, **“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”** For farmers, a bountiful harvest is good news. If the weather was right; if the rains came at the right time and there were no diseases or pests or storms to destroy your crop, when you get to harvest time and the trees and the plants and the vines are full of fruit – it was a good year. That's how Jesus describes this harvest.

But Jesus wasn't talking about fruit or grain or nuts. He's talking about souls. People. He was talking about all the people that he had been teaching and healing. These were the people who **“were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”** Jesus saw them, and he knew that they were people who needed to know the good news of the kingdom and they needed to know Jesus' compassion. And so Jesus says, **“The harvest is plentiful.”**

But, there's a problem. There's a problem in the fields. **“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”** This isn't a new problem or a unique problem. Perhaps you saw that series of articles earlier this month in the Modesto Bee that described how much farmers depend on laborers, especially at harvest time. It's not easy for farmers to get as many workers as they would

like. Even today, the workers are few, not because there aren't any people to work but because they cost so much.

In the spiritual harvest of souls, the shortage is not about dollars and cents, and it's not really about numbers, either. The problem was not just that his disciples were outnumbered in Palestine. It's not that there were no people who *could* work or who were *able to* work, it was that there were few people who were willing to work. The shortage in this harvest was not in the numbers. It was in hearts.

Jesus says, "**The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few**" and certainly the disciples of Jesus would ask themselves, "What about me? Am I one of those few who are working to bring souls into the kingdom of God? Or do I sometimes stand at the edge of the field, comfortable where I am and too busy with my own business? Perhaps I'm not always willing to speak up, or to act, or to give. Sometimes in my own selfishness I even insist on higher wages. I refuse to work because of a lack of appreciation or recognition.

You see, this simple word of Jesus all too often condemns each one of us. It points out our frequent unwillingness to work, or even our indifference. It points out those times in our lives when our own harvest, our personal agenda and priorities were more important than seeing those people whom Jesus saw – people who are harassed and helpless, like spiritual sheep without a shepherd.

So the shortage in this harvest is not in Jesus and not really in the harvest: the shortage is in me. I have sinned. And these words lead me – lead all of us – to fall on our knees in repentance and pray: Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.

And from our knees we see a different message in this account. "**Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**" From our knees we see Jesus bringing good news of salvation – not just to towns and villages in Galilee – but to us. Now we see Jesus busy at work in the kingdom, preaching and teaching, acting and speaking – for us. He acted perfectly in the place of our inactivity. He spoke perfectly in the place of our shameful silence.

And when Jesus looks out and sees the crowds, he also sees this crowd of people, who have been harassed by sin and temptation and who also are helpless to do anything about it. He sees us in our sin and his heart goes out to us. He forgives us, even when we have been lazy or indifferent or distracted.

So Jesus directs his disciples, to see the real shortage that is in us, to confess that sin, and to be supplied by the abundance of his grace. But he doesn't leave us there. And that's good because we have a big job to do. The harvest is still plentiful. And the workers are still rather few.

After all, what could twelve disciples do among so many people? Or what can a congregation of 300 do in a community pushing 300,000? And it's not exactly easy-going, either. The thousands of people who live around us aren't exactly beating down our doors to find out about Jesus. Your average unchurched neighbor may not be sitting on the other side of the fence just waiting for an invitation to church. It's not that easy.

As we try to do mission work outside our community through our Synod, the task looks even more daunting. It's expensive to send and support missionaries, and if we have to call back missionaries and if we can't open new missions (as has been the case in the past few years), then we're also going to have trouble finding a place to send graduates who have trained to do that

work. And if we can't send graduates, it gets harder and harder to recruit students to train for future work. The task seems so big and just keeps getting bigger and we think to ourselves, "What are we going to do? What's the solution? It's too hard."

But what does Jesus say? "**Ask the Lord of the Harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.**" Before we get all upset about how big the task is and how great the challenges are, talk to the guy in charge of the harvest. Ask the Lord. You see, he is still in control of his harvest field. Nothing has escaped his attention and his care. You can be assured that the harvest is still going according to plan – his plan, not necessarily yours. You can trust that the Lord of the harvest will watch over his harvest until all has been brought in.

Now ask that the Lord of the harvest send out workers into his fields. Trusting that our Lord knows the best way to manage his church and the spread of the gospel, we ask that God now send out workers. But how is he going to do that? Well, certainly in the past God was known to send workers directly. He did that to Jonah (and the other Old Testament prophets). Jesus sent his disciples and Jesus appeared to Paul and sent him.

But what about today? Do we pray this prayer and expect someone among us to be tapped on the shoulder and sent out as a missionary? Probably not. So what are we really praying for when we ask the Lord for workers? Are we not asking the Lord to give people the appropriate gifts and abilities to tell people about their Savior? Aren't we asking that God would work in some people the desire and commitment to speak the good news about Jesus or even to train themselves for future work in the church? Sure.

But do you know what Jesus did after he told his disciples to pray? – after Jesus told his disciples, "You pray for workers."? In the very next chapter Jesus sent out those twelve disciples. He used them as the answer to their own prayer. When we pray for workers, aren't we also asking God that he would work in us the desire to support those people who are willing to work in the harvest fields of the Lord – here in our congregation or across the country? Aren't we asking that he would work in us the desire to expand and increase the amount of work being done? Aren't we even asking that God could, in some way, use us to do the work of proclaiming his name? Maybe through our words, maybe through our actions, maybe through offerings or our volunteering – the Lord of harvest is sending out a worker – not to bring in the entire harvest all by yourself, but just to do one little part of it. And little by little, one piece at a time, God's harvest will come in. He knows how many workers he needs. He knows what needs to be done. When we don't know those things, Jesus says, seek the solution from the Lord of the harvest.

There is lots of work to do. Or, in Jesus' words, "**the harvest is plentiful.**" Those words are still true today, even here in Modesto, CA. It's hard to even imagine how there could be any more opportunities than this congregation has right now. But what should we do about it? What direction shall we take? And every one of might ask that same question: what should I do? Let's take our direction from Jesus: Let's see the shortage in us, confess our sins, and turn to our compassionate Savior for forgiveness. And when the task seems insurmountable, let's seek the Lord's solution: let's pray that God would use his people – even each one of us, to work in his harvest field. Amen.