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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 6, Series A (Pentecost 2)
Saturday, June 17th, 2017
Sunday, June 18th, 2017 (Father's Day)

Sermon: The Lord of the Harvest

Text: Matthew 9:35-10:8

Focus Statement: The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

Function Statement: That they would pray to the Lord of the harvest to send more workers.

Sermon Structure: Story-Applied

Doctrinal Locus: "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted..." (AC V).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. In our Gospel lesson today we hear that Jesus had compassion on the crowds "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36, ESV).¹ In the Good Book there is almost nothing as terrible as sheep without a shepherd. Going all the way back to the wilderness wanderings of the Exodus, God told Moses to appoint Joshua as a leader over the congregation of Israel, so that God's people "may not be as sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:16-18).

Why? What's the big deal? Well, as my friend, Pastor Harmon, likes to ask: What do you call sheep without a shepherd? *Lunch!* That's

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

right: lunch. Sheep without a shepherd easily fall prey to lions, wolves, bears, leopards, and other predators. Sheep are dirty and dumb, hopeless and helpless. Without a shepherd, they are doomed. They need a shepherd to protect them from their enemies.

The same thing is true in our spiritual lives. Throughout Scripture, God compares us to wayward, wandering sheep. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...” (Isa. 53:6a). Like sheep, we are willful and wanton, foolish and full of sin. In other words, we are dirty and dumb, hopeless and helpless. Our enemy the devil “prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). That someone will be *you* if you do not hear, believe, and obey God’s Word. So you better pray that you don’t fall prey to the devil’s temptations.

But Jesus doesn’t want us to be caught by the devil’s claws. He loves us so much that he *died* for us on the cross. So rather than making fun of us or abandoning us, he has *compassion* on us when we are like sheep without a shepherd. In the Greek New Testament, the word for “compassion” is *splagchnidzomai*. Can you say that with me? *Splag-*

chnidz-o-mai. Oh, my! What a tough word! *Splagchnidzomai* means so much more than just feeling sorry for somebody. *Splagchnidzomai* is that down-deep, gut-wrenching, intestinal twisting pity that moves you to action and mercy. *Splagchnidzomai* is a serious word for serious business. Amazingly, it's a verb only used of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, and the Forgiving Father in Jesus' parable of the Lost Son. Nobody else ever demonstrates this same kind of down-deep, gut-wrenching, intestinal twisting love and mercy—nobody but Jesus!

So Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in his great compassion, urges his disciples to pray for shepherds. “The harvest is plentiful,” Jesus says, “but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37-38). The harvest is plentiful, because there are so many lost sheep ready to be gathered in. And yet there aren't enough people to carry out the work. So Jesus urges us to pray for pastors—and other workers—to labor in the Lord's harvest, people to preach and teach the Good News.

The very next thing Jesus does after praying for workers in the harvest is to call the Twelve apostles. He sends them to do what he

does—“to heal every disease and every affliction” (10:1; cp. 9:35). He sends them to say what he says: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (10:7; cp. 4:17). The reign of God is near—and it’s *here* in Jesus Christ! The apostles announce the kingdom, and the miracles they do bear witness to the Word they speak. Ears hear and hearts believe, changing lives forever. It is the Lord’s harvest! The coming Kingdom breaks into people’s lives all because Jesus had compassion on the crowds, “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). Now Jesus is their Good Shepherd—with his faithful apostles as under-shepherds to tend his flock. Jesus called them to pray, and then he called them to ministry.

Jesus says that the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. That is just as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. There are many hopeless, helpless sheep harassed by the devil and wandering like sheep without a shepherd. There are lost people—unbelievers—in your neighborhood, at your school, your office, the places you shop, even in your family and circle of close friends. Without faith in Jesus, the Good

Shepherd, they are utterly and completely lost, doomed to death and damnation in hell for eternity.

Indeed, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. There are not enough kingdom workers in the Lord's Church today. Seminary enrollments plummet even as pastors retire from the ministry faster than new men enter it. There is a huge shortage of pastors across church denominations, including our own. By way of example, my incoming seminary class in 2003 had more than 150 guys in it. Lately, incoming classes at both seminaries (St. Louis and Ft. Wayne) number only in the 50's or 60's! That's more than a 50% drop!

And, according to research by the Barna Group on *The State of Pastors*, pastors are getting older too. The median age of pastors in America has increased from 44 to 54 over the past 25 years. At first blush, this might sound good for the church: after all, older pastors presumably means more wisdom and experience to share. However, that's not necessarily the case. Nowadays the majority of new pastors in the LCMS are second career men who will not be able to serve congregations for 40+ years of ministry. Fewer and fewer young man

are answering the call to serve in the Lord's harvest field, which means that we're driving towards a cliff in terms of a major clergy shortage just a few years away.

As a fellow pastor, I am keenly aware of the challenges our churches. I cannot speak as well about a shortage of teachers, deaconesses, or directors of Christian education. While the pulpit may not be the best place for a recruitment appeal to church work and ministry (face to face interactions are better), this Gospel reading makes it unavoidable for me to talk about this important matter.

Dear people of God, the harvest *is* plentiful, but the workers are few. Pray, therefore, to the Lord of the harvest, to send out workers into his harvest field! Ask the Lord Jesus to raise up men and women who seek to serve in full-time ministry, whether it be as a pastor, deaconess, Lutheran school teacher, or DCE. Souls are at stake! And even though the Great Co-Mission is actually a calling laid upon *every* Christian (recall last week's sermon), professional church workers are indispensable as leaders for the Church.

According to the New Testament, pastors are a gift from God and an answer to prayer (Eph. 4:11-12). Pastors proclaim the message of Jesus and the Apostles: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 10:7). God’s kingdom comes when the Holy Spirit gives us grace to believe God’s Word and live holy lives (cp. SC, 2nd Petition). Pastors and other church workers are on the frontlines of getting the Gospel out. And that is why we cannot ignore Jesus’ plea to pray for pastors and other workers. As we confess in our Lutheran writings, God instituted the preaching office (*Predigtamt*) so that we may obtain saving faith in Jesus Christ. After all, it is our pastors, teachers, and parents who deliver to us the life-giving Word of Jesus. God ordinarily works through means. He doesn’t ordinarily drop Bibles from the sky that hit you in the head and convert you right there on the sidewalk. Nor does he wake you up in the middle of the night with a special sermon just for you. No, he works through other *people* who preach and teach.

At some time in your life, God sent somebody (or, most likely, several somebodies) to tell you about Jesus’ death and resurrection. God loves you so much that he sent someone to tell you that Jesus loves you

and died for you. And the faith he gives you to believe and receive that message is what changed your eternal address and final destination from hell to heaven.

Other people also need to hear that Good News. So keep telling your friends and family about Jesus. Wherever you go as a Christian, you are on a mission with Jesus. But pray also for Jesus to send *more* workers into his harvest field. Pray for more pastors—more shepherds—to reach the lost sheep. Pray for more teachers and deaconesses—and church workers of every kind.

And pray for the Holy Spirit to show you whether or not maybe *you* are meant to enter into fulltime church work. You're never too old or too young to answer the Lord's call. Moses was 80 years old. Jeremiah was about fifteen. Samuel was only five. Boys and men, ask the Lord if *you* are supposed to be a pastor. It doesn't matter if it's your first career or second or third. Our church body, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, now has many ways to become a pastor. It used to be that you had to have a college degree, knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, and a four-year seminary master's degree on top of that.

Not so anymore! There are multiple educational pathways into the ministry nowadays, including distance education and mentorship by your own pastor, or an alternate route for older men. Ladies, consider whether God wants you to become a Lutheran teacher or director of education, like Lisa or Karin, working with children and youth in a congregational or school setting. Several of our church's Concordia colleges and universities have programs for this. Both of our seminaries also have training programs for deaconesses, who focus on mercy ministry and work with women. Maybe you have thought for a long time about the ministry and just need a little nudge. Maybe it never occurred to you until this message. Either way, talk to me as soon as possible, so I can help you understand the possibilities.

Perhaps as you look at our confused and troubled world today, you will recognize—like Jesus—that the crowds are harassed and helpless, “like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). Is your heart stirred? Do you feel that same gut-wrenching, intestinal twisting pity and compassion for the lost? Jesus had compassion on you. He died for you, forgives you, and lives for you. So pray to the Lord of the harvest!

He needs more workers. You might be one of them. “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.