

Year A Proper 11 The Harvest is Plentiful Matthew 9:35-10:10

“The harvest is plentiful; the labourers are few.” I don’t think we have any problem believing the second half of that statement – “the labourers are few”. We feel “few” yet, at the time we hear Jesus speak today, he had just 12 labourers – the disciples – and we, although we feel “few”, have more than Jesus did. It’s the first part of the statement that causes us some disbelief – “The harvest is plentiful”. I think many people have a difficult time believing that the harvest is plentiful. Harvest, of course, refers to the people who would hear and believe the good news that God’s kingdom is near.

There are plenty of people outside the Church but...ready and willing to hear the good news of Christ? That’s another story, isn’t it? However, our current situation is so strikingly similar to the one facing the disciples that I find it incredibly exciting. Of course, it makes you wonder what on earth the Church has been doing for the last 2000 years that we would now be in the same situation as the disciples...facing many more nonbelievers than believers...we’ve gotten quite a few things wrong as the Church, not the least of which was operating like the worldly kingdoms we were supposed to be freeing people from but, that’s a whole other sermon – or rant, take your pick. The fact remains, we *are* in a similar situation and it *is* very exciting. This is a great time to be the Church together so let’s explore why this is so beginning we how we are similar.

Jesus is traveling the countryside, teaching and preaching the good news that God’s kingdom is at hand. He is curing every disease and sickness, we are told. He looks at the crowds following him and he has compassion on them because they are harassed and helpless – like sheep without a shepherd. This is imagery taken

from Ezekiel 34 where God, through the prophet, speaks against the leaders of Israel who have been feeding themselves. “Should not the shepherds feed the sheep?” God asks. “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost” (Ez.34:2-4). The people are sheep without a shepherd because the shepherds – those with power and money – are taking care of themselves rather than helping others. That is, indeed, a familiar tune. The gap between the rich and the poor has been continuously growing – accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic – and Canada is no exception to this trend. According to the World Economic Forum, the richest 10% of the world’s population take home 52% of the income. When looking at wealth – the assets and items other than income – the richest 10% of the population own 76% of the wealth. The poorest half of the population owns just 2% of the world’s wealth ([Global income inequality: How big is gap between richest and poorest? | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#)). We know that, beyond our circle here as Church together, the prevalent thinking is “everyone for themselves,” “feather your own nest first”. Although we are not a part of that poorest half – it may feel like it sometimes, but we are not – we do often feel “harassed and helpless” like the crowd clamouring around Jesus because we are the “have nots” in comparison with others and when trying to deal with large institutions and corporations. We all jump through hoops, feel swindled by banks who charge us to use our money while the CEO’s enjoy lavish lifestyles, we pay into insurance policies we know we’ll never collect on, watch news stories about unethical – sometimes outright corrupt – politicians, lawyers, business people, and so on.

Many of us would be a part of that crowd, eagerly listening to Jesus' news about the kingdom that would see the end to all injustice, oppression, and inequality...and why would we be a part of that crowd?

Many studies continue to show that poorer people place greater importance on God than rich people do ([Is Belief in God Necessary for Good Values? Global Survey on Religion and Morality | Pew Research Center](#)). Poorer countries have more believers in God and the number is increasing. Western countries like ours have declining numbers of people participating in religion. That is not to say that people who are poor or struggling with life in any way will all believe in God. And all wealthy people or "got it together" kind of people are not all nonbelievers. These are trends and Moses warned against this. He said to the Israelites who were about to cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, "Now, you're entering a land of plenty," he said. "When you have all you need and more and you think you no longer need God to provide, when you feel like a 'self-made man', don't forget about God." Well, of course, they forgot about God.

And now here we are...with the "haves" and the "have nots" of society, with the downtrodden, the harassed and helpless, with those exploited by the more powerful, with too many sick and old left to wither away in institutions never visited by a surviving relative, with many who have forgotten God...and here is another similarity we share...many have turned to other gods. Jesus was sending out his disciples into a world where there wasn't just one God but many...The Greeks and Romans who had most recently ruled over the Israelites had introduced a plethora of foreign gods into their society. They had a god for everything – even the Roman Emperor thought he was a god and expected to be

worshipped. We may not worship Plutos, the god of wealth or...perhaps...maybe we do. We may not worship Hedone, the goddess of pleasure, enjoyment, and delight or...perhaps...maybe we do. We may not worship Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty or...perhaps...maybe we do. There are many people obsessed with these things – wealth, personal happiness, beauty – they see no other point to life beyond these things. We likely don't go that far but, there are a lot of gods being worshipped in our society. Remember, the word “worship” is a contraction of “worth-ship” – the placing of value on people and things. When our worth-ship of other people and things exceeds our worth-ship of God it is time to remind ourselves, just as Moses did for the Israelites, God is the creator and redeemer of all, worthy of our thanks and praise, undeserving of being bumped down our list of priorities.

Into our situation, so incredibly similar to that of the disciples, Jesus speaks to us. As with the disciples, Jesus has entered our lives to bring healing and, just as with the disciples, it does not end there. We are to bring the healing to the world. Jesus calls us to him and then sends us out – it happens every single Sunday when we gather for worship...we are called and sent. Our sending instructions are quite phenomenal. Not only are we to proclaim the good news that the kingdom is near, we are to “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” Matthew is making a very deliberate parallel to what he has told us Jesus has been up to: “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.” The disciples of Jesus are to do exactly what Jesus has been doing. We are to be Jesus for the world – the hands and the feet of the body of Christ for a world who needs Christ, who needs us. Well, I have never

raised anyone from the dead. I suspect that none of you has either. Thankfully, Paul tells us that there are many and varied gifts of the Spirit. "God's love," we hear him say today, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." We pour that love out on the world through the many and varied gifts that we do have.

Being a good Christian does not, though, simply mean doing good things, being nice, and loving people. We can "run the tap dry" if we constantly practice "love of neighbours" while forgetting the first part of the command is "love of God." Practicing the love of God means paying attention to God and to what God loves (p.187). We are very good at proclaiming that God loves us but we have been much less good at emphasizing our love for God (p.186). This takes practice. In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus J. Borg writes, "Modern Western Christianity, especially Protestantism, has not made practice central. This is very different from other religions. Judaism, especially orthodox Judaism, is primarily about practice, about following the 'way of Torah.' At the center of being a Buddhist is the 'eightfold path,' all of it practice. So also for Muslims: of the five 'pillars' of Islam, four are about practice, one of which is praying five times a day. I have been told," he continues, "that the five prayers together take about forty minutes, and I have often wondered how we as Christians would be different if we spent forty minutes a day in prayer" (p.188)

Christian life is about relationship and transformation and so practice is central. To quote more of Borg, he writes, "By practice, I mean all the things that Christians do together and individually as a way of paying attention to God. They include being part of a Christian community, a church, and taking part in its life together

as community. They include worship, Christian formation, collective deeds of hospitality and compassion, and being nourished by Christian community. They include devotional disciplines, especially prayer and spending time with the Bible. And they include loving what God loves through the practice of compassion and justice in the world” (p.198).

Our first and greatest gift is the gift of God’s love, freely and lavishly given. Practicing paying attention to God helps us know we are loved – we have immense worth in the eyes of God – it helps us learn to love because it transforms us into the love of God, a new creation. It is then that we can practice love of others through our many and varied gifts, endlessly fuelled by the endless love of God. We are the hands and feet of Christ. We *are* few but the harvest *is* plentiful; therefore, ask God to send us out into God’s harvest.