

“Don’t Go Far”

Matthew 9:35-10:8

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, pour out your Holy Spirit and illumine these words for our hearing and living. Open our hearts and minds that we might find strength for these days and hope for tomorrow. Amen.

(Adapted from *Our Little Lives*, by Howard Thurman)

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In the chapters before our Gospel reading, the twelve who follow Jesus are disciples-in-training. They are students. They follow Jesus from town to town to sit at his feet and learn all they can from their teacher. Jesus reframes for them what they believe about God, and teaches them all about God’s kingdom not just being a heavenly thing but something they can participate in and bring about on earth.

He teaches them all they need to know, equips them with everything they need, and now, it’s time for them to put their knowledge into practice.

They go from village to village, and crowds of people are showing up. Crowds of people who are struggling, and hurting. Crowds of people who feel abandoned by the systems of power in their world, crowds of people who have lost hope.

Day after day, as Jesus sees these people, and stands in front of the disciples and it is like he is saying, . . . “Look at all of this, do you see what I see? Do you see the potential here? Do you see what could be? But I can’t do it all on my own, There is so much healing needed, will you join me?”¹

The harvest is great but the laborers are few. Jesus speaks in metaphor The harvest is those who are ready to hear and receive the word about just how near God really is.

A ripe harvest will not wait. The crop gets picked, distributed and consumed - or it dies and rots unused. A lack of workers disrupts the entire food chain causing damage to all those affiliated with it, and at the same time, everyone needs to eat.

Jesus knows that a world without workers to share the good news is one in peril, one filled with rot, one in which hunger runs rampant, one in which the bounty of the earth meant to nurture instead gets plowed under and wasted.

Take our current context in a time of pandemic, praying for laborers to bring in the plentiful harvest might be taken literally. The coronavirus, and subsequent travel restrictions and rate of infection among migrant workers living in close quarters, has left crops rotting in fields. You may remember seeing images of fruits and vegetables being piled up in the field because of the disruption in the food chain.

The lack of agricultural workers in our time is due to the damaging effects of COVID-19, travel restrictions, punitive immigration policies, low pay and, in many cases, abusive working conditions. In a sense, we are not reaping because of what we have sown.

Pastor Jill Duffield asks these questions, “In all the turmoil and pain of these days, is there, in fact, a plentiful harvest ripe for the picking? Or has our reluctance to go into the fields and labor, rendered good fruit useless?”

Jesus sends out his followers with good news for the poor and oppressed. He sends them out to rely on the hospitality of strangers and to preach and teach and heal. Nowhere in this harvesting is there room for selfish gain or exploitative practices.

Right now, the harvest of those ripe to hear Christ’s message of hope and justice, ready not just to hear about the kingdom of heaven but see it come to earth, swells into the streets of Columbus, and cities and towns across our country and world. Indeed, the abundance of people yearning, yelling, and demanding the ability for all to breathe free grows by the day.

It is like Jesus says, “Look at all of this, do you see what I see? Do you see the potential here? Do you see what could be?”

“Don’t go far,” Jesus says. There is work close by and people in need of God’s saving word. Jesus implores the disciples to be ambassadors of reconciliation, peacemakers and justice bringers.

This week, a colleague reminded me of the famous poem by Langston Hughes:

Harlem²
What Happens to a Dream Deffered?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

That crop of dreams of which Hughes speaks will not wait forever to be realized and harvested. If the workers don't show up to heal and cast out evil, and dreams and longings and lives get thrown away or plowed under, all that sustains us will collapse and none of us will survive, let alone thrive.

Jesus sends out the disciples to do this redemptive work of God.

Redemption says nothing is so lost that it can't be brought back into the fullness of life. Redemption says nothing is a waste. Everything can be renewed.

THIS is how God works.

God enters the most broken places, and loves into the most hopeless situations. There God plants beauty, God plants purpose. It is there that God redeems.

This is the work that Christ calls his disciples to when he says to them “The harvest is so great, but the workers are few” and this work of redemption and reconciliation is where Christ is sending us as well.

We, as people of faith, do know this. Jesus is among us here and now. The kingdom of heaven is near. We know what Jesus commands. We know what the prophets say and what the Lord requires of us. The harvest is ripe; what is needed now are the laborers.

African American author and theologian, Howard Thurman offers two lines in his prayer “Our Little Lives”:

“We do not know how to do what we know to do.
We do not know how to be what we know to be.”

Just like the disciples, Jesus sends us out to proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. The harvest is so ripe for the life-giving, justice-bringing, Word of God, but many of us refuse to go to the fields and fail to be what and who we know to be. We are scared. We think we don’t have the skills or the language. We think someone else will show up instead. And yet, the harvest won’t wait forever. It will fester. It will rot. It will explode.

As we wrestle with the state of our life together, the undeniable, centuries-long inequities, the systemic deadly racism, story after story of black and brown beloved children of God murdered by those supposedly entrusted with “keeping the peace” for every member of every community, we (particularly white Christians like me)

must ask ourselves if we are willing to do the labor of harvesting and distributing God's abundant crop of justice and love. We must ask our selves that. Are we willing...to harvest and distribute God's abundant crop of justice and love.....?

And if we are, ...there is work to do in the field close by.

This kingdom harvesting work that Jesus is referring to is not easy. There is risk.

- We cannot expect to be about casting out evil without at least some real pushback.
- We cannot expect to help heal deep, open and life-threatening wounds with band-aids and without putting ourselves in harm's way.
- We cannot expect to cleanse lepers from a safe distance.
- We cannot proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ from a sound-proof bunker of personal protection.

We cannot do any of this without a willingness to listen to and fight for and walk with those long oppressed.

You don't have to go far! On the corners of Broad and Cleveland, down the block at Broad and High, in our own living rooms and dining rooms, in our classrooms and offices, there is good redemptive work to do, if we take up the challenge before us.

We also know this, we are going to need a lot of faith and courage, endurance and mercy and prayer. We are going to need to extend and receive radical hospitality from strangers who may very well be angels among us. We need all of the above (and then some) in order to go

into the fields of our current world.

In our personal work, in our collective work, we can bring the heavenly harvest of which Jesus speaks. It is this redemptive work of justice which will feed us and sustain us all.

May it be so.

Amen.³

¹ Based on reflections and questions on this text with ministry colleague, Rev. Trip Porch, Indianola Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio.

² Langston Hughes, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>

³ Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, June 8, 2020. This message was inspired from the Lectionary Offering for the day, linking harvesting in the field with the current state of our nation and the need to have more laborers in the field. My sermon follows her ideas for this text.

A Reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, beginning in Chapter 9. (9:35-10:8)

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 labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

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. 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Hear what Spirit is Saying to the Church.

Thanks be to God.

