

Help with the harvest!

It's amazing how fast Houston changes, isn't it? One of the things I loved about the 50 anniversary celebration was getting to see pictures...and hear some of you talk about...what the area around Alief was like when we first built here: Cow pastures and farm fields. Now, you have to drive miles west to find stuff like that. Really, it's true all over Houston - Sugar Land use to be sugar fields, Meyerland was once rice fields, Sienna Plantation cotton fields. But now the farm fields are gone and replaced by streets, homes, businesses...a city bustling with 6 million people.

That's what we see – no more fields, just city. But you know what Jesus sees? He still sees fields. Sure, the cotton, sugar, and rice are gone...but they've been replaced by fields. Fields of souls that are ripe for the harvest – souls that don't know about Jesus or care about Jesus...souls that desperately need a Savior, and maybe don't even realize it. And Jesus wants us to see them, too. Not just to see them, but to see them with the same eyes he does...and to get to work with him. Listen as Jesus calls you and me to help with the harvest. 1) With a harvest heart, 2) With harvest action.

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

1. With a harvest heart

Jesus saw fields ripe for the harvest. Can you picture the people flocking to Jesus, crowding around him? They come with problems like leprosy, diseases, demon-possessed or dying loved ones, and Jesus is helping them. Healing them.

But Jesus looks past those problems to the greater spiritual problems they were bringing. Matthew says these people were "**harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**" We get the picture, right? A sheep lost and alone, with no one to care for and feed it, is destined to die. These people were spiritually lost in wasteland of sin and unbelief. Their "shepherds" didn't help...they harassed. Instead of leading them to Jesus as Savior, comforting them with God's forgiveness, they harassed them with rule after rule – lists of do's and don'ts. Led them astray

with the lie that if they kept them, they could get to heaven. Left them alone, broken, burdened, without help and heading for hell.

And what's Jesus' response? **When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.** The word "compassion" here is so descriptive. You know how when you experience intense emotion, you feel it down here – in your chest and your belly? That's what's described here. When Jesus sees these lost souls, his gut wrenches, his heart breaks for them. He's filled with compassion to help them and save them. To do what Matthew says here: **Proclaim the good news of the kingdom.** The good news of what he'd do to save them. The news of forgiveness in him. Bringing these lost sheep to faith in him and into his fold.

Friends, helping with the harvest starts with having a heart like Jesus'. Can you see the harassed and helpless lost souls around you? Sometimes they're easy to spot – maybe their dress gives them away as Muslim or Hindu, trusting in some other god than Jesus to save them. Maybe they're living in an openly sinful lifestyle. Maybe every time God comes up in conversation, they scoff. But sometimes they're not so easy to spot. They're nice people, always helping, but on the inside thinking that's why God might let them into heaven. They have it all – the nice car, fancy house – but the thought they might need Jesus never really crosses their mind.

Helping with the harvest starts with having Jesus' compassion for these souls. But that's something we struggle with, isn't it? I put myself in his shoes – and I don't know if I'd be full of compassion for those relentless crowds. A part of me would have seen those people with their problems as a nuisance, a burden, an infringement on my time.

As a church, we struggle with this. Content to see the same faces coming, not all that concerned about adding new ones. Or even as we work together to grow, more about pride - adding numbers, or paying bills – not compassion for lost souls, a desire to save.

As individuals, we struggle with this, too. Instead of compassion for the lost, maybe indifference. Their problem, not mine. Too preoccupied with our own lives to notice, too self-involved to probe past their exterior and find out what's in their heart. Maybe even self-righteous disgust at people's sinful lifestyles, or frustration over their spiritual ignorance.

And it just goes to show...that it wasn't just the crowds that day that needed Jesus' compassion. It's this crowd here this morning. That we're the sheep who are still harassed by a sinful nature and helpless to save ourselves from our sins.

Thank God we have a compassionate Shepherd. When the Son of God looked down at us from eternity, he saw nothing better than what he saw in that crowd - lost sinners, in a desert of sin and unbelief, and destined to die forever for it. And instead of being disgusted or annoyed or seeing you as a bother...his heart was filled with compassion. His gut twisted at how lost and helpless you were. His heart wrenched at the thought of you being lost forever.

His heart was so full of compassion for you, that it brought him all the way down from heaven to earth to rescue you. Every moment of his life, always seeing the lost around him, always loving them perfectly...for you. In your place. So he could credit that perfect love to your account. His heart beat with so much compassion for you that on the cross he let that heart stop beating for you...to pay for your sins. The Shepherd laid down his life to rescue you, a lost and

wandering sheep. And then, some two thousand years later, still filled with the same compassion, he reached out his staff and brought you into his fold when he brought you to faith.

Helping with the harvest starts with having a heart like Jesus'. Know where you get it? By remembering Jesus' heart towards you. His compassion that saved you. His compassion that still forgives you and cares for you. That's how he gives you his compassion for the lost – and like it did for him, it'll move you to action.

II. Harvest action

So, what would Jesus have us do? Well, listen to what he says: **“The harvest is plenty, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”**

It's still true today. You may have noticed your pastors have been getting a lot of calls lately. Know why that is? Right now, there's a shortage of pastors and teachers in our synod. More places to serve than people willing to serve. **The harvest is plentiful, but the workers few.**

But it goes beyond our synod. And beyond called workers. The problem Jesus still sees is that there are so many lost souls who need him, but so few actually sharing Jesus with them. The solution? Jesus says, “Pray.” Since it's God's harvest, ask him to send out workers to bring it in.

Stop for a second and think about the “worker” God used to bring you in. Maybe it was your parents, as they brought you to be baptized. Maybe it was a friend who invited you to church. Maybe it was a pastor who taught you about Jesus for the first time. Do you realize that God might have sent that worker into your life, precisely because some Christian somewhere was asking Jesus to send out workers?

So, do you want to help with the harvest? Jesus says, “Ask for more workers!” Pray that God would move more young men and women to want to serve as pastors and teachers. Pray for more missionaries to be sent all across the world. Pray that God would move more Christians to get to work sharing Jesus with the people they know.

But then...be ready to be the answer to your own prayer. That's what happened to these disciples, right? It's almost humorous, when you picture it: They get down on their knees praying for God to send workers into his harvest field...and when they're done, Jesus says, “Great news! The Father already answered your prayer. You're the workers!”

Friends, you're the workers! Jesus wants to use you as the answer to your own prayers. You don't have to be a pastor or teacher. You don't have to travel to a foreign country and become a missionary. In fact, Jesus didn't send these disciples to foreign countries...not just yet. **Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.** It's not that he didn't come to save Gentiles and Samaritans, too – but he just has the disciples start where they're at. He'd have you do the same.

I've been to churches that have a cool reminder of this. Hanging over the church's exit, so everyone can see it as they walk out the doors, they have a sign that says: “You are now entering your personal mission field.” Whether we have the sign or not, have that mindset. Your home is

your mission field. Your work is your mission field. Your school is your mission field. God's placed you among people who are still lost, so that you can help with the harvest by sharing Jesus' love with them.

I don't know about you. But anytime I hear sermons about sharing your faith, I feel guilty. "I don't do that enough...I need to do more." Jesus doesn't want to send you out with guilt. Did you catch his final words? **Freely you have received; now, freely give.** Jesus sends you out not with guilt, but with grace. Freely you've received. Forgiveness for all of your sins. Peace with God. Eternal life with him in heaven. All Jesus' gifts to you – no cost, no strings attached. Now, freely give. Give to others what you've received by telling them about the Jesus whose compassion won those gifts for you. By giving your time to help our church do the same thing. By giving your offerings so others can bring Jesus to people here and around the world.

That's what helping with the harvest is all about! Amen.