

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 17-18, 2017
Matthew 9:35-10:8

“Holy Harvest”

The shooting that took place in the Del Ray section of our own city, Alexandria, is a graphic reminder of the fragility of life. Things can change in a moment. Our prayers continue for everyone impacted by this act of violence. This incident serves to remind us also that the little things in life really do matter: doing good in Jesus’ Name, getting better acquainted with our neighbors, saying “I love you” because the truth is that all any of us have is only today. The little things in life are not so little. In these early summer days, with schools not even dismissed yet for the summer break, one of the little things I’m doing is watching my garden grow. There are summer squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, and onions in my backyard. My wife and children call me “Farmer Jack,” a throwback to my roots on the Iowa farm where I grew up. I suppose there is truth in the phrase about how you can take the boy out of the farm but you can’t take the farm out of the boy. Nothing wrong with that. There is something immensely satisfying about planting a small seedling in the spring, tending to it, watching it grow and mature into a fruit-bearing plant. And as we all know, nothing beats a home-grown tomato! Already there is fruit appearing on the tomato and squash plants; they’re nowhere near to being ready for harvest at this point, of course, but they’re coming along. Later on this summer, we will literally be enjoying the fruits of our labors. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus speaks of a holy harvest – not of garden produce, but human souls: **“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest”** (Matthew 9:37-38). This becomes the theme for preaching today under the theme, “Holy Harvest.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The garden plot of Jesus is the world we live in, filled with people who are all created in God’s own image (Genesis 1:26-27), who are dearly loved by their Creator God even if they do not know or comprehend who that Creator God is. Like our own backyard gardens, Jesus’ garden is filled with different varieties of individuals who are all growing side by side. They don’t all look the same. Jesus’ description of the crowds He saw is insightful: **“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”** (Matthew 9:36). I don’t want to mess with Scripture, but in keeping with that harvest theme, maybe we could say, “They were weed-infested and overgrown, like a garden without a gardener.” The point is, in looking at the teeming crowds of people that surrounded him, Jesus didn’t just see with his eyes; he saw with his heart of compassion and mercy. That heart of compassion and mercy moved Jesus to see deeper than all the surface stuff of disease and affliction that often is all that we see. These are the things that make us squirm and turn away, and thus not see beyond them. Human need is often overwhelming, as anyone who has worked in addressing human need will tell you – needs of body, mind, and spirit. So many needs, some of which we can address, but others which only the Lord can fill.

That holy harvest is ready and waiting, Jesus tells us. Sometimes, though, we want to rush things before the fruit is ready to be picked. Sometimes we want things done on our time-table and according to our agenda. But that can be counter-productive to the harvest. Remember that story from Greg Finke in his book, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, about harvesting apples? At a previous congregation he served in Michigan, where there were lots of apple trees and orchards, Greg learned the lesson that if you tried to pick an apple before it was ripe for picking, you would end up breaking off part of the branch and thus injuring the tree. That apple wasn’t yet ready for harvest; that apple was ready when it was ready, not when you or I thought it should be. Before there can be a harvest, there has to be a planting. And before there can be a planting, there has to be preparing of the field. After planting, there has to be cultivation, tending to what has been planted with regular watering, fertilizing, and weeding. Everybody wants to help

with the harvest, but not everybody wants to do the weeding. And yet, how essential that is! What does the harvest look like here in the area around this congregation? What does it look like in your neighborhood? It may well be true that some harvesting is ready to happen, but it is also true that some preparing of the field may need to happen so that future seeds can then be planted and tended to. I remember many years ago going to an evangelism conference where the speaker said about Gospel outreach: “Don’t assume that you’ll be the one doing the harvesting. You may not do this, and you may not do the planting. Your job may be just removing some rocks from the field so that someone else later on can come in and plant those seeds.” I’ve always remembered those words because I believe they are true. In the kingdom of God, none of us operate solo. God’s harvest comes about through many different workers, as Paul the apostle writes: **“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth”** (1 Corinthians 3:6). That’s helpful for us to remember. We’re not the ones who bring about that growth in people’s lives as they come to know and love Jesus. That is God’s work alone through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As Lord of the harvest, Jesus first sent those twelve disciples, his apostles, out into a restricted harvest field. They were only sent to **“the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (Matthew 10:7). That’s where the harvest would begin, but after Jesus’ death and resurrection, that harvest field was expanded to include all peoples and nations: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”** (Matthew 28:19). Jesus sends us out into his harvest fields today with this good news: **“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in what while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:6-8). This is the good news that makes an eternal difference in the lives of people everywhere. We are Jesus’ “sent ones,” his apostles, today. That is actually what the word apostle means – one who is sent (ἀποστέλλω). The Lord gave special gifts to those early apostles to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons (Matthew 10:8), which we may not have in our own lives today. But what we do have is the life-giving Word of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that breaks strongholds of sin, leads people to repentance, forgives sin, and gives eternal life.

Her name was Katherine Hankey (1834-1911). She was the daughter of a prosperous British banker and she grew up in a stylish London suburb. Without calling it such, she joined Jesus on his mission and started a Bible class for girls in her neighborhood. When she was only eighteen, Hankey went to London to teach a Bible class of “factory girls.” In her twenties, she started other Bible classes for factory girls. When she was in her early thirties, Katherine Hankey became seriously ill. Doctors said she needed a year of bed rest. She was forbidden to teach her Bible classes for twelve months. During her long, slow recovery, she wrote two lengthy poems. The first, was written at the beginning of her convalescence and the second was written ten months later. After ten months, she felt strong enough to leave her bed. She soon returned to her Bible classes in London and continued teaching for many years. That second poem of Katherine Hankey may be familiar to you:

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love;
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true,
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.
I love to tell the story!
'Twill be my theme in glory—
To tell the old, old story
Of Jesus and His love.*

The Lord of the harvest is calling you and me to tell that old, old story of Jesus and his love through our words and our actions as we, like Katherine Hankey, join Jesus on his mission in daily life. God help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.