

“Harvest Time”

Scripture: Matthew 9:35-38

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Matthew 9:35-38: ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for 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 laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Jesus says, “It is harvest time.” Literally, he says “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” Harvest time is an intriguing Biblical metaphor. Harvest can certainly mean joy...contentment...like a thanksgiving celebration for the fruitful bounty of the earth. Anyone who has ever pattered around in a vegetable garden and then feasted on the produce...anyone who has gathered blackberries or grapes...knows something of the joy of harvest. The old Gospel hymn went, “We will come, rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves”...the sheaves of wheat. Harvest time is a joy.

The other Biblical meaning of “harvest” is not so cheery, not so completely positive.. Harvest means bringing the wheat from the field to the threshing floor. There the edible wheat is separated from the stems, stalks, and husks. Harvest is then a separation time...some are wheat; some are chaff. When Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, spoke of the harvest, he meant God was going to take care of the good and bash the bad. The wheat goes to the barn; the chaff goes to the fire.

Jesus says, “It is harvest time.” And the question is this: Is this a time of joy and celebration? Or, is this a time of judgment and separation? And the answer is “Yes.” According to the reading today, Jesus saw that the people were like sheep without a shepherd. And for those who know they need a shepherd...those that know that life can be hard...those that know we really do not have all the answers...this is a time of joy and thanksgiving. For those who have things figured out; for those who do quite well by themselves...those who do not want or need a shepherd...for those who insist on “my will be done,” it is judgment.

There is a recent movie directed by Sean Penn, entitled, *Into the Wild*, which details the story of one Christopher McCandless. Chris graduates from Emory University in 1992 and then proceeds to wander the United States and ends up trying to survive in the wilds of Alaska. The director Sean Penn has taken a certain amount of liberty with the actual story (that’s Hollywood). But here is a smart, bright young man who turns down Phi Beta Kappa honors and who makes decisions that put himself in danger and hurts those who love him. And we the viewers have great affection for him—this Christopher McCandless is a sincere young man, who just wants to do things his own way. After surviving several months in the wilderness, he gets into trouble and decides to hike out but he cannot get across the river that he crossed earlier that is now raging with snow melt. What we are not told in the movie that because he entered the wilderness without a proper map and without a compass, he does not know there was cable and hand-cranked tram just a ¼ of mile from the place he tried to cross the river. The tram: A person sits a chair and can turn a crank that will carry the chair over the river. Chris could have left at any time. He, instead returns to his campsite, and

continues to try to live off the land. A month later some hunters find this note at his campsite: “S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August ?” When McCandless was found, he weighed 67 pounds. So bright, engaging, gifted...able to make it into the wild but not out of it.

Was Chris McCandless ready for shepherd? The note that the hunters found indicates that he was: “In the name of God, please remain and save me.” Likewise, one of the last journal entries in his wilderness diary when he was in his worst shape says, “Happiness is only real when shared.” He has been alone for so long—he realizes happiness is only real when shared. He is was so close...everything is not about “my way.”

When Jesus saw the troubled world, he said “It’s harvest time.” He said, “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” And then he issued a command, a commission. Now many of you may realize that this Gospel of Matthew ends with what is called the “Great Commission”—“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:16-20). The operative word seems to be “go” in the Great Commission.

But we are not at the end of the Gospel yet. Here Jesus notes a troubled world and says “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” He describes the situation and then delivers a commission, what we might call the “first commission” or the “little commission.” Here the operative word is not “Go” but “Ask” or “Pray.” “Pray that the lord of the harvest will send out laborers into his harvest.” Before the Great Commission to “go” comes the little commission to “pray.”

I know, you may have wanted something more exciting, more invigorating, something more challenging. However, there are few things more difficult than prayer in our world and in our life. My read of my own life and the world around me is that we are much more interested what provides either retreat, work, distraction, or anger. Retreat...how many just want to stop the world and get off. How many of just just want a break? Work: we all have more work that we could all be doing. Getting things checked off our list drive our lives. Distraction: can you change a CD in your car, text message on your phone, and drive at the same time? How big is your television screen? How many cable channels to you receive? Anger? Who can’t find something to rant and rave about? Conservative and liberal commentators are passionate about raving. Sometimes anger is the only thing that makes us feel alive.

Jesus does not offer retreat from this world. Jesus will ask for work...but prayer comes first. Distraction are just another form or retreat—a way to avoid. And ranting and raving are way to make us feel alive. Listen, I did my Ph.D. work at Duke University where there are young adults, who made perfect scores on SAT and ACT tests, regularly paint themselves blue and scream and yell obscenities at UNC Tar Heels...all over the way a brownish-orange ball goes through a hoop.

Jesus says, “Pray” to the lord of the harvest. Prayer is hard. Few people ever tell me that their favorite part of worship service is the pastoral prayer. I have had people ask that we sing more. On a few occasions, people have even said, “I wish you’d have preached a little longer.” I have had people say that they could listen our choir sing more. But I don’t recall anyone ever saying to me, “I wish the pastoral prayer were longer.”

Few people ever come up to me and say, “I wish you would make the silent prayer after the Prayer of Confession longer.” However, a few years back, a parent did tell me that their young child did finally figure out why that silent time was there. The child said to her mother, “I know why we have the quiet time...so we can tell God about what we have done wrong. You know, Mom, Dr. Pender must not have done much wrong this week, because he didn’t give us very much time to pray today.”

Prayer is one of the practices of our faith that has to be intentional. The religion of Islam gets a rough treatment in America but a practicing Muslim is to stop six times a day, kneel, and pray. Stop what is occupying you and re-centering on whose creation you are! Many Orthodox Jews still put a box at their door way that contains Scripture and they touch it as they exit and enter and say a prayer. The function of rosary, a chain of beads, is to stay in prayer and a specific focus as you grasp a certain bead, then move on to the next bead, with another prayer and focus. There is intentionality in all these practices.

Intentionality is hard when most of just want to be motivated or inspired. Sometimes I do not have to try to care...I just care. Sometimes I do not have to work at being generous...I can put it on a bank draft and take care of it. But prayer is rarely so unintentional and natural...except when we have wandered too far into the wild. Then the prayer is “Lord help me, I am in a fix.” Jesus’ little commission is as demanding as the Great Commission. Prayer is a practice...a habit to be cultivated...a manner of life to be put on.

You are going to hear from Sunday to Sunday much about our following the “Great Commission”—get and up and go. Following Jesus is not a passive act. But this Sunday, we stop at the “little commission” or the “first commission:” pray. There’s a lot to do be done in that harvest: “The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few.” But before you get up and go...pray.

Many of the participants in the civil rights movement in the Sixties recall how the call to action was so clear. Here was time when fire hoses were directed at peaceful protesters...where German shepherds with sharp teeth were let loose on marchers...wire-tapping of phone calls of ministers—that on the governmental side. And then there was the bombing churches...burning crosses...murdering those who spoke out—that from a segment of the society. Many participants in the civil rights movement remember the call to action...they wanted to get out in the street...fight back...fight fire with fire. But wiser heads prevailed...living out of anger and fear would only make matters worse. The first thing to be done was prayer...and prayer...and prayer.

It is not easy...it will not happen unintentionally...but this is first commission: “Pray that the lord of harvest will send laborers into his harvest.”