

“Harvest Hands”
Matt. 9:35 – 10:8
June 15, 2008

Let me start this sermon with a confession that I am sure that the opening portion is going to be dreadfully inaccurate. As a little girl, I always wanted to live on a farm, but never made it to that goal. So, with our Gospel passage referring to the Lord of the Harvest, I did a little bit of research on harvesting practices, and am prepared to tell you what I learned about growing alfalfa in Walla Walla county. Those of you who actually know farming can correct me during coffee hour! Hopefully, when this is over, you will see some relevance to the Bible and our lives of faith!

While alfalfa (which is a perennial and part of the pea family) is grown generally for providing feed hay, and for pasture and as a rotational crop to provide the soil with nutrients, in Walla Walla it is grown primarily for seed that is harvested and sold world wide. Along with California and Idaho, Washington is a lead producer of alfalfa seed in the United States.

There are all sorts of time lines that a farmer must follow for harvesting alfalfa, depending on the intended use. When it is grown as a seed crop, the flower is allowed to bloom and produce seeds after pollination occurs. To insure pollination, alfalfa seed producers must keep bees, of which there are two kinds that prefer alfalfa blossoms and thus do an effective job. This happens in July and

August. The crop needs sunny days and cool nights, but the days cannot be too hot or the buds will burst and release the seed into the soil and make it impossible to harvest. The plan is for the seeds to be harvested at the end of August or early September, but it must be before the first rain as precipitation will destroy the plant by causing it to wilt and also making it impossible to cut and process the seed.

So, as you can see, it is a complicated process and a timely harvesting is of utmost importance. And the Bible says, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

As Jesus travels through the cities and villages, he imagines the people; the crowds, as a vast field ripe for harvesting! He says of the crowds that he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. It’s like coming upon a field of alfalfa, ripe and ready, when the forecast is for rain. It’s ready! The people are ready and in need! Rather than focusing on their aimlessness and confusion, Jesus declares that the people are ready for the "good news" of the "kingdom" of God. The dilemma, as Jesus acknowledges, is that the labourers are few. This is Part One of this scripture: Jesus, the ever compassionate shepherd, points out the situation.

Next comes a very interesting part of the story. Part Two. Listen carefully. “Then Jesus summoned his 12 disciples, and gave them authority...that’s the first verse of Chapter 10. Verse two begins, “These are the names of the 12 apostles...”

Matthew's account names the twelve as disciples and as apostles. "Apostle" is from a Greek word meaning, "those who are sent." They are named not just as followers but as ones being sent by Jesus.

I spent some time thinking about sending and being sent. Some of the things that came to my mind were sending my children to kindergarten on the first day of school (and crying), sending our graduates on to college or out into the world, sending folks off on a plane or on a vacation. And the more I thought about today's scripture and sending, the more I understood how closely related the act of sending is to the purpose for which we send.. When I sent Paul and then Nora off to kindergarten, I'm sure I said something like, "have a great time and a really fun day," when really I was sending them to kindergarten to have a good experience, but really to learn how to read and follow instructions and get along with the other children and be a little bit independent and form their character which will be part of who they are for the rest of their life." All of a sudden, "have a good time" seems so loose and general in terms of what I was really sending them to school for. When we send young folks off to school or their first job, we're really saying, have fun, but learn how to be mature and support yourself and figure out how to live in the grown up world where you have to buy your own car insurance and pay taxes and form meaningful relationships.

So, too, does Jesus not only send us, but sends us with a purpose. In Part Three of this scripture is the commission that we are given, and that is to participate in his mission: to proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, and to do so without payment.

Eugene Peterson, in “The Message,” tells this story in a very refreshing way: Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. “What a huge harvest!” he said to the disciples. “How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!” The prayer was no sooner prayed than it was answered. Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits, and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives. Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge: “Don’t begin by traveling to some far off place to convert unbelievers. And don’t try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.”

We are invited to add our names to that list of apostles noted in the book of Matthew. Whether we are being sent to kindergarten, college, our first job, Deputation, the meeting of General Assembly, // as those called by Christ, we are being sent to do the work of Christ. The world is in constant need of liberation, justice, wholeness and a restored relationship with God. God is sending us...to have a really good time...and to serve as Harvest Hands.

Newport does a really good job of this – just look at our bulletin announcements this morning. It is important that each of us take this task seriously, as individuals, as well; that we are God's harvest hands in and through each part of our lives. Each one of us will need to consider what that means for our lives, because, the harvest is right here and it's ready.