

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 14, 2020
Matthew 9:35-10:8

“Harvest Outlook”

My garden at home is looking pretty good at the moment. After a very wet and cool spring, we finally had favorable planting conditions for putting in tomatoes, onions, peppers, eggplant, squash, cucumbers, beans, and other garden favorites. The warm weather and the recent rains have really caused plants to shoot up. It is wonderful watch things that you have planted with your own hands grow and flourish. And as I watch these vegetables grow, I wonder what the harvest outlook will be? I guess the old adage holds true: you can take the boy out of the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the boy. That farm where I grew up is the place where my brother and his family live now. For whatever reason, I receive at my house a publication called *Harvest Outlook*, except that it's not addressed to me; it's addressed to my brother. I guess the publisher thinks he lives at my house. This little magazine is one that is all about weather and crop conditions, planting season, commodity prices, land values, etc. Based on all sorts of data, projections are made about what the harvest outlook will be for corn, soybeans, wheat, and other crops. What is the harvest outlook? That is the question that is before us today in the Gospel lesson as Jesus calls and sends his chosen apostles into the world. The Scripture memory verse for this week serves as the basis for today's sermon: **“Then he said to his disciples, ‘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). The theme for today's sermon is entitled, “Harvest Outlook.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

We're now in that long season after Pentecost that stretches out for almost six months. The church year is divided into two halves: our Lord's half-year and the Church's half-year. Our Lord's half-year includes the three high festivals of our Christian faith: Christmas, which celebrates the gift of God the Father; Easter, which celebrates the resurrection of God the Son; and Pentecost, which celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord's half-year follows the life of Jesus and runs from December through May: his advent and birth; his epiphany; his suffering, death, and resurrection; his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Church's half-year is all about our response to the life of Jesus and runs from June through November. The liturgical color for this long season after Pentecost is green – the color of life and growth in the natural world around us. In truth, Jesus already knows the harvest outlook, not vegetables in the garden or crops in the field, but the kingdom of God. Jesus knows what this looks like even now. He says, **“The harvest is plentiful.”** Not a poor harvest; not a meager in-gathering of what has been sown and planted, but a harvest that is plentiful. That's important to remember. My dad used to say that a person didn't need to go to Las Vegas to gamble; just plant a crop. That's a pretty big gamble right there. There are so many things that can go wrong: poor weather conditions like too much or too little rain, scorching heat, windstorm, hail, etc. So when that crop is finally gathered in, you are ever so thankful. “That's a good job done,” my dad would say. With the harvest of souls in the kingdom of God there are many things that can go wrong and inhibit that precious seed of faith from growing to maturity. In about a month's time we will hear in Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23) what these things are: the evil one who snatches away the Word that has been sown like birds that swoop in and gobble up the seed; tribulation or persecution on account of the Word that causes the seed to shrivel up in the scorching sun; cares of the world and the desire for riches that choke out the Word like weeds that take over the garden. And yet in spite of all these obstacles, Jesus still says that the harvest is plentiful. That is his promise, and the Lord Jesus keeps all of his promises.

When Jesus looked at the multitude of people who had gathered around him, we are told these beautiful words: **“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and**

helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). That’s the kind of Savior we have; one who is concerned about people; one who is compassionate. That’s who Jesus is, whose compassion for his harassed and helpless people moved him to go to the cross for us and for our salvation as today’s Epistle lesson tells us: **“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 that while we were still sinners Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:6-8). We have a God who has done the unthinkable – the unimaginable – for us. We have a God who has taken our place, substituting himself in our behalf. There at the cross, Christ did indeed die for the ungodly – you and me. He died the death that we deserved and gave his life for us. This is the seed of the harvest: the good news of what Jesus Christ has done for us. What kind of seeds are we planting now? Can we see this present moment in time not only through our own eyes, but through the eyes of our neighbor? As our nation comes to grips with racial injustice and inequity, it is easy to sow seeds of division and discord. The Lord calls us to something better. The Lord calls us to sow seeds of justice tempered with mercy, seeds of healing, that will lead to that full and abundant life which Jesus came to bring (John 10:10).

In the Gospel lesson for today, we read about Jesus calling and sending the twelve apostles, instructing them to go and proclaim: **“The kingdom of heaven is at hand”** (Matthew 10:7). Jesus empowered his apostles to **“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons”** (Matthew 10:8a). Jesus reminded them, **“You received without paying; give without pay”** (Matthew 10:8b). The good news of the kingdom of God that comes with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is given freely, then and now. It has cost us nothing, but it cost Jesus his life. Now, how are we to live? What will we do in response to this? That word “apostle” comes from the original word here (ἀπόστολος), which means “one who is sent.” The apostles are literally the ones who are sent by Jesus out into the world. We were not there like Peter, James, John and the other apostles who walked with Jesus in his earthly life and ministry; who witnessed the miracles which he did in healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons. But make no mistake about it: we, too, are sent by Christ into the world to carry the good news of Christ to people everywhere. But we need help; we can’t do it all by ourselves. **“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). And that remains our prayer today: that the Lord would raise up workers for his harvest fields. Those harvest fields are not just in far-off, remote places on the other side of the world. Those harvest fields are right here under our nose; in our own neighborhood. And so it all begins with prayer to the Lord of the harvest. The harvest outlook is tremendous, and the Lord’s desire is that **“all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth”** (1 Timothy 2:4). Each one of us, by virtue of our Baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, is called to be a witness to Christ. A witness is simply one who tells others what he or she has seen and heard. We are not all gifted by the Holy Spirit to be evangelists, but we are all called to be witnesses, pointing others to the cross of Christ who loves us and laid down his life for us all.

As we begin the summer and enter into this long season after Pentecost, may the Lord who has begun this good work in us bring it to completion in the day of Christ (Philippians 1:6) when the harvest outlook becomes the harvest reality, to the glory of God and for the salvation of many. Amen.