

Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2020
“Ordinary People” (Matthew 9:35-10:8)

A couple of weeks back, I shared with you one of my growing-up-on-a-farm stories. I talked about how much I enjoyed riding the barn and pasture gates as they swung open and closed. Every kid should have that much fun.

Today I want to share another memory that takes me back to about age seven or eight. It’s the memory of my dad harvesting his grain fields. At that time (somewhere in the late 60s), he used an old green combine that was slowly pulled along by a tractor. This particular piece of equipment had a platform on which my dad would stand while the machine was in operation. This platform gave him access to the bin where the grain was eventually collected. On this platform, there was a small bench. This is where I sat when he allowed me to ride along –usually when I was taking a break from chasing rabbits through the field’s stubble.

Starting with a large pile of empty feed sacks, he would begin to empty the grain from the bin. As he filled each of the sacks, my job was to hand him a piece of twine string that he would use to tie it shut. He would then slide the filled sack of grain down a chute – which, by the way, looked like a cool slide to an eight-year-old kid. The sack would land on the ground, where it would lay until eventually picked up, put on a trailer, and hauled home.

As I grew, machinery also became more advanced. My dad stopped using that little combine, which meant he stopped sacking the grain. Instead, the grain was transported on a large truck, from which it was augured into the grain house and stored.

It was always amazing to me the amount of grain that could be harvested from a field – millions of tiny, individual grains. And it was hard work – something I later discovered – even when we had the assistance of family members who had been recruited to help with the process. At times, it seemed as if we would never get all that grain off the stalk and into storage. So much grain to be harvested, with seemingly so few workers – a difficult task – even with the aid of modern machinery!

In today’s gospel text, Jesus uses a similar analogy to teach his disciples: *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.*

Matthew tells his readers that *Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness.* And when Jesus encountered these crowds, we are told that he had compassion for them, for they were helpless; helpless as sheep without a shepherd. They were looking, searching, hoping for something better. And they were ready – ready to accept Christ as their Savior if only there was someone to tell them about him.

Just as the heads of grain are fully grown and ready to be harvested, Jesus knew that these people, and many others out there, were waiting to be harvested and take into the Lord’s grain bin. But with such a plentiful harvest, Jesus would need additional laborers to help carry to them the good news of God’s kingdom.

Up to this point, Jesus had been the sole missionary in proclaiming the good news of God's love, and he realized that because his ministry on earth would be for a limited time only, he would need a large workforce. He had, of course, been training his disciples to carry on his mission after his departure, but a workforce of only twelve would not suffice. So he instructed his disciples to pray for laborers – workers that would be sent out into the great, awaiting harvest – workers that would share the message of the gospel with others.

Children of God, that prayer is still needed today, for there are many living among us right now who are ready to give their lives to Christ – if only someone would show them the way. So Jesus commands that you and I also pray that people will respond to this need for laborers – people that will carry the message of the gospel to those sheep who are lost and waiting to be found.

And when we pray, we can be sure that God hears and answers those prayers. Although the text does not refer specifically to clergy, let me use that as an example of God responding to our prayers. When I entered seminary in the early 90s, the ELCA was projecting a great shortage of Lutheran pastors by the year 2000. We were told that the number of seminary graduates would only be half the number of pastors reaching retirement age. It looked as if the laborers would be few. But through the prayers of the church and the power of the Holy Spirit, God provided those clergy laborers, and the worry of a few years earlier was diminished. In recent years, we've heard the same projection again, but God continues to answer our prayers. Our churches have pastoral leadership.

And an example from our own congregation would be the mobile dental clinic we hosted in March. This was a tremendous undertaking for a small congregation, and we prayed that we would have the volunteer base to make it successful. Not only did God provide many of our own members to help, but we received many requests from folks outside our congregation to be a part of it. And those who came not only received much needed dental care, but experienced the good news of God's love and grace through what we did. So, you see, God *is* providing laborers for the harvest, just as God has always done.

Could one of these laborers be you? Let's see what the requirements might be. In chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus commissions the first laborers – his twelve disciples – giving them authority to cast out demons, to cure diseases, and to heal the sick. However, even though these twelve possess this authority given them by Christ, they are not portrayed as invincible heroes. Rather, they are portrayed as frail and ordinary human beings – just like you and me – whom Jesus empowered as an extension of his own ministry.

When we scan the list of the twelve names in today's text, we find a very diverse group – men from all walks of life, none of which are very outstanding. We find among them a couple of fishermen, a tax collector, and a political activist. We also find a man who denied Jesus, one who doubted him, and even one who betrayed him.

Although these disciples were Jesus-like in the authority and ministry entrusted to them, they remained frail humans, none the less. They were just plain, ordinary folks – much like you and me. In fact, we probably have more in common them than we realize.

Like James and John, the fishermen, we know what it's like to work hard earning a living, while at the same time, struggling to meet the demands of a family and other obligations we might have.

At times, we are like Peter. We deny the Lord by failing to give him the things he deserves. And what Jesus deserves is our obedience in following his words and commandments. Apostle Paul tells us in the sixth chapter of Romans that God has proved his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us and reconciled us to God. No gift is more deserving of a faithful response on our part. Christ deserves that we give glory to his name in all we do by using the gifts God has given us – our time, talents, and resources. Yet, we often deny him those very things.

Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Christ, is another with whom we share a lot. For Judas, it was 30 pieces of silver, but for what do you and I betray Christ? Material wealth...social status...self-glorification? Many times, it seems, we are too busy attending to the demands of the world that we forget about Christ – or worse – turn our backs on him as Judas did.

Finally, there is a bit of Thomas in us all, for we sometimes doubt Christ's presence and activity in our lives. When things get tough or we face trouble or crises, we feel that God has abandoned us. We often demand clear-cut, concrete answers of why something is the way it is instead of placing our complete trust and confidence in Christ and his promises.

In a sense, you and I are like all the disciples – for all of them had forsaken Jesus there at the end of his ministry, running away in fear. Then, concerned for their own safety and well-being, they were hidden away in the upper room behind locked doors. We, too, have hiding places, don't we? We all have places we go to avoid talking about our faith and commitment to Christ. What might yours be? The break room at work? Behind your computer or smart phone? In the shadow of someone you feel is better equipped to express and articulate your faith issues for you?

One of the major points of today's text, as proven by the commonness and humanity of these disciples, is that God can use anyone to share the good news: rich or poor, educated or uneducated, male or female, black or white, young or old – no matter how insignificant one might appear. As I said last week, God doesn't just use clergy and missionaries to proclaim the gospel of Christ. God uses common and ordinary people like you and me. Simply stated: God uses ordinary people to do God's extraordinary work.

And just as this ordinary band of twelve was called and commissioned to be Jesus' disciples to the lost sheep of Israel, God calls people like you and me to be ambassadors to the world in which we live. We are called to make Christ known.

We are called through our baptism For in baptism, we are united in the death and resurrection of Christ and set apart for service in his kingdom. In those holy waters, we are anointed,

commissioned and empowered by the HS to be Christ's disciples in the world. And it is through Christ's real presence in the bread and wine we receive at the Lord's table that our faith is strengthened and nourished to help us in our roles of discipleship.

And that's all we need to be laborers for Christ – not wealth, not popularity, not good social and communication skills, and not a sinless life – just the mark of Christ and the power of the Spirit, which are given to us in Word and Sacrament as a means of God's grace.

Yes, there are a lot of sheep out there, waiting to be brought into the fold, and a lot of grain – like a vast harvest – ready and waiting to be reaped. So pray, my friends, that the Lord of the harvest will call laborers into the field – ordinary men and women, boys and girls – to serve him in a special and extraordinary way. And when that prayer is answered by God's calling you or me to join the harvest, then so much the better.