

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Did you hear a sense of urgency in the words that Jesus spoke in this Gospel passage from Matthew? He is calling the disciples to assist in the salvation of the world; did you hear the clock ticking? Despite the style of some others, it is an Episcopal sensibility to read scripture aloud without the bias of dramatization, not exactly dispassionately, but allowing the scriptures to be read aloud for their content alone and permit the Holy Spirit to inspire the ears of each listener. So, I try to do that. Did the Spirit inspire you to hear some urgency in Jesus' voice? Now, it's *Mark's* Gospel, which our confirmands are reading, which is famous for urgency, where so many sentences begin with the word 'immediately'. Matthew's Gospel, with its more elaborate and longer descriptions, might have lost some of Jesus' call to do things 'right away', but certainly what he is asking of his disciples in this passage seems to be time-sensitive, don't you think? The salvation of the world always seems that urgent: the time is right! The harvest is plentiful! the opportunity is now! The laborers are too few!

Jesus chooses a metaphor from agriculture to make his point and rally the missionaries. It is like harvest time, and any farmer who is outstanding in his field knows that the time to accomplish the harvest is limited, that the opportunity is time-sensitive. But one of the commentaries I've read about this scripture suggests that in these modern times, such a rural metaphor isn't very helpful anymore, that we, unlike our ancestors, aren't so often farmers standing out in fields anymore, and that we should re-phrase our description to be more relevant and compelling. Maybe Jesus could use a sports metaphor...the game is tied but still winnable, and the clock is ticking. Instead of asking the Lord of the harvest to send out the best farmhands, ask the coach to hurry and send in our best players while there is still time. Or perhaps a fire-call metaphor: an occupied house is on fire and the clock is ticking down before the roof might collapse. Ask the chief to hurry and send in more firefighters, well-trained and equipped firefighters, to save the residents!

Can you think of a metaphor for salvation that means something to you personally, that might capture the sense of importance that Jesus feels for this ministry? How about you teachers? Y'know, Gale starts getting her robo-substitute calls at 6pm every evening, and the phone doesn't stop ringing until after 10. There are children out there who need to be learning, and the clock is ticking for them. Send out your professionals into the schools, for the time is ripe and the laborers are few. And, guess what...it's recital season, and there are piano-students out there who desperately need their pianos tuned now! Send out qualified tuners, certified by the Piano Technicians Guild, into their homes before it's too late! Or how about this metaphor for an urgent time-sensitive need: the pregnant woman finds that her water has broken and that the baby is coming. Call the dula, make sure there are nurses available at the hospital, grab my go-bag, pay the health insurance, gas-up the car, call all my friends and relatives to start praying for me...the clock is ticking! Or how about this one: there are too many empty pulpits, and whatever it is that priests are supposed to do isn't getting done for lack of laborers out in their field. Lord, call up men and women like Fr. Jim Heidt to strengthen the roster with talented players to assist in the salvation of the world.

Notice in our reading this morning all the instructions Jesus gives the disciples. Apparently sending out laborers for the mission of salvation isn't quite so simple. Not only should we be highly motivated, but also well-trained. Athletes who might save the day should be physically fit and know

the rules and strategies of the games in which they compete. Firefighters must have the clarity and good training and equipment to serve their communities. Teachers need to be ready for their tasks not only with good content knowledge but also inspired with a love for children. And pastors, like our friend Jim, take their instructions from Jesus seriously. And sometimes, as Jesus says, those who present themselves for salvation service will need to endure suffering of one kind or another. Sometimes even bitter sufferings like betrayal, harassment, persecution, even death. Yet the Spirit is with you, he says, and will guide you, strengthen you, and even put the right words in your mouth. Your service will be honored, not so much with creature comforts, but with the opportunity to yourself be among the saved. Paul says in his letter to the Romans that God has proved his love for us in the sacrifice of Jesus, and that our suffering will indeed produce endurance and endurance produce character and character produce hope, and that hope will not disappoint us. The Spirit has a curriculum for training us to follow Christ's instructions and be competent laborers.

Among Jesus' instructions to the disciples, whom he says he is sending out like sheep in the midst of wolves, is a command which you might find disturbing: he orders them to keep their mission work among the House of Israel and to avoid Gentiles and Samaritans. In other words, this ministry is meant only for Judeans and Galileans. That might seem harsh to our ears, but I propose a cause for this and I find a clue in the story of Abraham. Remembering that Jesus and the disciples were themselves Jewish descendants of Abraham, the biblical record is, in large part, a story of how God has used one particular family to be laborers in the field, assistants in the work of saving the whole world. Should Abraham be found faithful enough despite his human failings, then he is given the opportunity to raise up a whole family of disciples and assistants trained for God's universal merciful work. And that work, when done faithfully, produces a dream for all of creation. Certainly, the Bible reveals how the Jewish ancestors of Jesus were tested, refined, and proven for ministry, how they suffered and endured to build character and bring hope. But their purpose, as is stated and restated in scripture, is to be messengers to "the Nations", that is to all the rest of the world's families. Abraham's descendants were called to be laborers for God, who then were to train, by word and example, all the world. But first, says Jesus, they need more training themselves. The lost sheep of Israel need more rehearsing before they can take their show on the road. He wants them to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, for that will be crucial to their urgent work. And the clock is ticking.

As you read and hear this Gospel, this 'good news' has spread beyond just one family. All are called to be the laborers. You are called to be one. The church is called to be one. And you are called to help train others, too, using the gifts of the Spirit you have inherited. The church is called to help train others, that the laborers might not be so few. And just what is it that we are being trained to do? The Gospel, the good news of Jesus, instructs us to proclaim that the dream of God is real and has come near to everyone. We are being trained to cure sickness, as Jesus did, by promoting healing and reconciliation. To raise the dead in spirit, as Jesus did, by confronting fear and replacing it with love and hope. To cleanse the reputation of society's lepers, as Jesus did, by shining a revealing light on prejudice and disrespect. To overcome and cast out the demons of addiction and violence in the name of grace, in the name of Christ Jesus. Matthew's Gospel lists here the names of those upon whom Jesus was counting to be missionaries for salvation, those original twelve. Pray to the Lord of the harvest that you, too, might be included in that holy roster. Amen.