



## **Lord of the Harvest**

### **Romans 5:1-8; Psalm 100; Matthew 9:35—10:8**

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Matthew's gospel reports that Jesus traveled through cities and countryside doing what he is used to do: **teaching, preaching, and healing**. And observing the harsh reality of the people he comes across, he is moved with *compassion* and gives his disciples a topic to pray for:

<sup>36</sup>When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were *harassed* and *helpless*, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup>therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

This is the same call that followers of Jesus have had through the centuries, and it remains relevant to us still today. One of the many ways Lutherans are responding to that call in our own day is by contributing to **Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR)**, the denominational program that helps in the face of significant disasters. LDR says, "When the dust settles and the headlines change, we stay to provide ongoing assistance to those in need."

In *The Diary of Jesus Christ*, a book as profound as it is delightful, award-winning screenwriter and playwright Jesuit Fr. Bill Cain has Jesus admit that he sent the disciples out on mission because he desperately needed a break from them. But even more than that, he knew they needed the experience of doing the mission rather than simply witnessing what Jesus did. They needed to get up close and personal with the "*harassed* and *helpless*" mass, explore their inner reaction to the people's predicament, their prejudices and fear, the pressure of responding to their need, the challenge to get it right, the creativity to come up with solutions and make a difference in people's life.

As he sent his disciples out to get their feet wet, Jesus challenged them to consider that faith is not meant to be kept as a personal good but something to be shared: a disciple enjoys both a time of learning *and* a time of action. **Faith is love in action** trusting that God will provide. But we are the instruments in God's hand.

The disciples were to learn that their new way of life was not to be spent solely in the spiritually fulfilling presence of Jesus but needed to **grow in compassion, trust, and generosity** towards those who suffer. Likewise, a faith community does not exist for the sake of its members but for the sake of others, for the sake of the world God so much loves. We are sent to extend our care outward to those who suffer around us. By doing so, we stretch beyond ourselves and grow in giving of ourselves. Jesus wants us to step into the mess of our present reality, rather than retreating from it. If our main goal is to feel good about ourselves and find a convenient niche of respectability, then we cannot follow Jesus. We become too stable, too comfortable and stale. Thank God, Jesus' Spirit comes along to disrupt our protected and comfortable space .

In a way, Jesus wanted to teach his disciples (and us so many years later) that if our neighbors are not the subject of our prayers than we are not praying an outward looking prayer, we are not praying to the God who cares for our neighbors. What he wants us to understand is that God is ready to work **through** us rather than **for** us. It is not enough to sit back and bask in warm feelings. That would be self-indulgent, and by the very fact of focusing on ourselves, it would erode our sense of purpose and our awareness of God's love as a free gift. A child of God reflects the Father's character: compassion and personal involvement is what we see God doing.

What they were to announce was the nearness of the Kingdom manifest in concrete ways: "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." (Mt 9:7-8)

Where is healing needed today? Where are the dead who need resurrection? What cleansing needs to happen? And what social, physical, spiritual, and psychological demons must be exposed and exorcized so people may experience the fullness of life?

I wonder what those disciples must have thought when Jesus told them they too could take command over evil spirits and heal the sick, cleanse the lepers and raise the dead. Did they look at him with wide open eyes and dropped jaws? Did they swallow hard? Did they make up excuses looking for reasons not to do as commanded? Were they in denial of people's needs? Have they tried negotiating with Jesus? Were they pondering the cost of the mission?

When we read the rest of Matthew's story, we hear Jesus warn them about all the dangers they would face, dangers that became all too real for them after the Resurrection.

Whatever they felt, whether **excitement** for the adventure, **fear** of the road ahead, or a sense of woeful **inadequacy** facing what seemed to be expected of them, they went out in trust. And they trusted even as Jesus counseled: "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food." (Mt 9:9-10)

Jesus sent the disciples out for their own good as much as for the good of the world. In the dynamics of the reign of God, good is not separable and compartmentalized: what is truly good for one, is good for all of creation and vice versa. We will only comprehend how much God has given us by giving it to others. Grace does not exist as a private possession.

Taking the invitation and challenge of today's Gospel to heart, let us do all we can to be and become a church of disciples who continue the mission of Jesus to heal, preach, and teach. Amen.