

“Workers in the Field”

Introduction: I don’t know who does most of the driving in your family, but it’s likely that one person sort of assumes that task while the others of you just pile in and go along for the ride. It’s a funny thing but if you’ve been riding in the passenger seats for a while and are suddenly asked to drive, it’s often the case that even though you’ve made a certain trip many times before, now that you’re driving, you can be unsure of where you’re going. You may recognize a road or two, but there is all the difference in the world between sitting in a car while someone else makes decisions about which route to take, and doing it yourself.

Up until this moment in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus, we could say that the disciples of Jesus have been passengers in the car, and he’s been doing the driving. They have been astonished by the scenery—at what they’ve seen and heard as they’ve ridden along with him—but he’s made all the decisions, dealt with all of the oncoming traffic of criticism, and handled all of the tricky turns. That is about to change. Jesus has been preparing his followers to not simply be along for the ride, but to get behind the wheel themselves and take part in his mission to the world. He wouldn’t be abandoning them—ultimately, through his Spirit, he would function more like a kind of GPS system in each of them—but it was time for them to begin to learn what proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God was all about, by doing.

So, let’s begin to think about this by hearing how God, through the prophet Ezekiel, speaks of the need for mission, and how Matthew shows us how Jesus, and then his followers, begin to meet that need.

I. The Need for Mission

A. I had us hear again our text from last week in which we saw Jesus open the eyes of two blind men and unstop the mouth of a man who was mute because, as we were reflecting on this text in my small group, the question came up as to whether this was a literal healing that went on here, or a metaphorical one. Important to note is that, depending on the genre and/or the context, there are times when the Bible is meant to be taken literally and times when we should take it metaphorically. Both, however, communicate truth. So, for instance, we may not have four legs and a furry coat, but we all, like sheep, need to be guided and directed and rescued. The metaphor of a sheep in need of a good shepherd helps make that connection.

B. In this case, I think that these healings are both literal, and perhaps also metaphorical. They are literal because they’re included at the end of a whole host of texts that we’ve been looking at the past few months in which the amazing authority of Jesus has been demonstrated – his authority over illness, over nature, over the demonic, over sin, and even over death. It’s an authority which reveals that indeed, the kingdom of God has come, the king himself is among us, and heaven has begun to break into earth, literally, just as Jesus instructs us to pray. And, I think, these healings have a metaphorical bent to them. I say that because, coming at the end of this group of texts, these two healings lead us into a summary statement in which Jesus sees the needy crowds and continues to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, both of which he then calls his followers to do, as we’ll consider in a moment. Metaphorically we could say that to participate in the mission to which Jesus is calling us, we need to have him both open our eyes to see, and unmute our mouths to proclaim.

C. As Matthew moves us into the next, mission focused section of his gospel, we hear Jesus calling us to join him in mission through another kind of both/and section – vv. 35-38. Here, Matthew both summarizes all that Jesus has been up to and then begins to extend what he’s been doing to those who have been following him. He does so by use of two metaphors, that of a flock and that of a field.

1. Regarding the flock, Jesus sees that the crowd around him is struggling with life. They, in fact, are like sheep without a shepherd. He draws this image largely from the prophet Ezekiel, as we just heard, but also from a few other texts in which the leaders, or shepherds, of Israel are being called to task for falling short in providing for the spiritual care and guidance of those who have been entrusted to them. Further, they are charged with spending most of their resources on fattening themselves, slaughtering their animals, and clothing themselves with their wool, but neglecting their needs (Ex. 34:1-3). As he observes this truth among the crowds, Jesus is filled with compassion at how harassed and helpless they were. “Compassion” is a word that speaks to deep feelings, in the “gut” or actually, the “bowels or kidneys.” To see how ill-cared for these people were, and how they were missing out on the life that is truly life, pained Jesus greatly.

Part of what we’re meant to see is that the promise of God in Ezekiel, that God himself will search for his scattered flock, gather them together, and look after them, and that he would ultimately do so through that great shepherd, David, was coming true in Jesus. In him, the Good Shepherd of Israel had come, to gather and tend his sheep.

2. But Jesus was not going to do this alone. We see this as he moves the metaphor from flock to field, as he envisions a vast crop of ripe grain in need of harvest, or gathering in. To do so, harvesters are necessary. Foreshadowed here is the church as the Twelve will begin to fill that role, as well as seek out many more harvesters, in what would become the continuing mission of the church.

D. What surfaces through both of these metaphors is the heart of Jesus, who desires that many enter and enjoy life in the kingdom of God, as well as the need for mission, or for workers in the field, to reveal the presence of and invite people into, that kingdom. From its very beginning, the church was called to be mission minded.

Illustration: You’re no doubt aware that a few weeks ago your church council sent out a brief spiritual survey to our mailing list to try to get a read on how you all are doing post-covid, and to get some idea as to what you are thinking about church in these days. Overwhelmingly, those who responded expressed a desire for increased attendance and membership, and for the Lord to send more young families.

Given what we see in Jesus, and what he said to his disciples, what might he say to us? How might he help us think about being mission minded? I think his focus might center on three words: see, pray, go.

## II. The Movement toward Mission

A. See. Jesus might begin by asking us to consider: What are the needs out there in the places where we live and work? Where might we see people who are harassed and helpless? What do we see people pursuing when they think of being happy? Where are they anxious, or exhausted by the pace of life? Where are we aware of injustice of some kind? How are they being led astray by some kind of false thinking? Where does the world around us lack beauty?

Our vision here, our sight, could range from seeing the need among the many refugees who are just looking to survive from day to day, and how we might help provide for them, to asking how we can help a friend care for a child, or an elderly parent. What needs do we see?

B. Pray. "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field." This request comes because the potential harvest is greater than the available harvesters. The relief is that it's the Lord's harvest. We're not responsible for the growth of the kingdom; he is. But he is also calling for our cooperation, and part of that cooperation involves praying that the great needs we see will be met by those who throw in their lot with him.

C. Go. Simply put, if we're asking the Lord of the harvest to send out workers, are we willing to go, to be one of them? Are we ready and willing to be used to meet the needs that we see? The 12 experienced this. Jesus called them to pray for additional workers, and then a few verses later, we see that they are the first group he sends out (10:1, 5)! Such going need not be a trip of several thousand miles. It might just be to the coffee shop around the corner where you meet a neighbor and, in the course of your conversation, share the reason for the hope that you have, or the beauty of community that you are experiencing at church. Or see if there is an opportunity to come alongside a group in your town that is serving others in some way.

Perhaps the supreme motivation for mission is to see those who are languishing in some way as they live outside the kingdom of God. Does our heart, like that of Jesus, break for such people? Does it move us toward compassion? Does it lead us to offer, as did the prophet Isaiah: "Here I am. Send me!" (Isa. 6:8)

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, let us remember and be glad that our Good Shepherd Jesus saw our need, saw how harassed and helpless we were, had compassion on us, had some kind of conversation with his Father about the work he was being asked to do (Jn. 17:4), and offered to leave his heavenly throne room and be sent to come and rescue us.