

Sunday, August 11, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19
Matthew 9:35-38

The Harvest

Harvest—something many of us here are very familiar with—is one of the main images used in our passage today. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, Jesus tells the disciples. However, that’s not the only image used in this passage—we also hear of sheep without a shepherd. Now, to fully understand what Jesus means in talking about the harvest and sheep without a shepherd, we must look at this section in its entirety, not just the two verses in which these images are mentioned.

First, we’re reminded of all that Jesus is doing—he’s going to all the cities and villages teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news, and healing people of diseases and illnesses. As he is going about doing all these things, he sees the crowds. This would not be something new to Jesus—he’s been followed by crowds and has been seeing them through the entirety of Matthew’s gospel. But as Richard Ward, a professor of preaching, points out:

Jesus’ relationship to “the crowds” changes. He *sees* them differently. They are not simply the chorus that responds with puzzlement and wonder to his miraculous deeds...[Instead] Jesus’ experiences...have trained his eyes to see [the crowds] as “sheep without a shepherd.” It is dangerous to leave sheep unattended; they are “helpless” and “harassed” by predators. What arises in Jesus is compassion...Jesus sees the crowds as God sees them. (*Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*, Ed. Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2013. 251)

And this is not the first time that God has seen the people as sheep without a shepherd.

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Jesus is often referred to as the good shepherd, or the shepherd of the people, especially in the gospel of John. But the shepherding imagery goes all the way back into the Old Testament. In fact, this is not the first time this specific phrase, “sheep without a shepherd” is used in the Bible. In Numbers 27, which is a story about a transition in the leadership of the people of Israel, “Moses asks God to select a leader to follow him so that Israel may not be like ‘sheep without a shepherd.’ Just as Moses will pass the mantle to Joshua, so Jesus is about to commission his followers to take up and continue his ministry” (Ibid.).

In the same moment, Jesus also recognizes he does not have a lot of time in which to pass on the mantle of leadership, which is when the metaphor in the passage makes the shift from sheep without a shepherd to the idea of the harvest. Throughout the Bible, the understanding of harvest is tied to the understanding of time, especially God’s timing of things. As we know, and as Cynthia Campbell explains, “Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer or grower needs to mobilize people and equipment to bring the crop in as quickly as possible. Just as Jesus sees a flock of sheep needing the care and direction of a shepherd, so now he sees a large crop waiting in the field for farm workers to complete the harvest” (Ibid.).

But what does a harvest related to people look like? We know and understand harvesting crops—gathering them in, but we don’t often talk about harvesting people. Does that mean we’re to go out and bring everyone we see, the people of the field, the people without a shepherd, into our way of believing, into our church, aiming for conversion of all people? Or might it mean something different?

Trace Haythorn examines this idea from an understanding of community and what it means to be community. He writes:

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Jesus is the model for ministry. While many people often come together seeking Jesus' assistance, they do not come together as a community. They do not come together as a collective; they amass as a crowd, driven by their individual needs...James Bailey writes, "In Matthew's narrative, the crowds are depicted as needy in search of food and healing; in contrast, the discipleship community is able to move beyond its own needs to be in ministry for others. For Matthew, the church exists to identify with needy people (all people)." The faithful leader of a community of believers is like a shepherd, often meeting them as a crowd and leading them into a community of compassion. (Ibid., 248, 250).

But there is no time to waste. Jesus recognizes that he will not have the time to do all of this work on his own. And so,

Matthew has Jesus name the Twelve, the apostles who will be entrusted with 'authority over unclean spirits...and to cure every disease and every sickness.' These practical acts of compassion are not new ministries; they are the very acts in which Jesus has been engaged...No longer are the disciples observers of Jesus' mighty acts; they are now cohealers, literally the "sent ones." Jesus' ministry is now their ministry, and in this transaction [when Jesus names the Twelve] their ministry becomes the ministry of the church. (Ibid., 250).

So, to go back to the question of what does it mean to harvest people? It means to see the crowds as God sees them, as Jesus saw them. To then respond to their needs with compassion and care. And to invite people who were part of the crowd to become part of the community; to become part of the community that sees others as God sees them and offers compassion and care.

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That's it. That's all that is mentioned here. There's nothing here about growing a church body, ever increasing in size and number. There's nothing here about converting the entire world. What is here in this passage, is a call to view all people as God sees them—as sheep without a shepherd who are in great need of care and compassion.

Jesus, using the imagery of the harvest, reminds the disciples, reminds us today, of the urgency of this task. As Tom Long points out:

Jesus tells the disciples, “[A]sk the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” This is addressed to the disciples, but the church in every age has always heard Jesus speaking these words. The people wander “harassed and helpless,” needing kingdom the kingdom ministry of compassion. Moreover, it is a mission that cannot wait for a more opportune time—when the church is stronger, richer, or more confident. The harvest time has come, and laborers are needed in the fields today. (*Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew*, Eds. Patrick Miller and David Bartlett, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. 113).

There is work to be done now. In this moment. Today. And yes, it can seem overwhelming. There are so many crowds in need of so much care and compassion. So many people that God is inviting, demanding, that we see in the way God sees them. “It can be easy,” Kathy Dawson writes, “in the face of so much need, to shut down or to be confused about where to begin to address these problems. [Yet] Jesus impels us toward action with his claim that the harvest is upon us” (*Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*, Ed. Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2013. 252).

Now is the time to see people as God sees them. Now is the time to offer care and compassion. For if we're not willing to do it now, then when? I heard someone say once, if The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

you're waiting for everything to be perfectly in order before you do something, you'll never end up accomplishing anything. Because there never will be a perfect time. There will be and there is only God's time. And God has been telling the world, since the time of Jesus up through today, that the time is now. There is no point in waiting any longer. The time of harvest is here. The people are in need now. Jesus needs apostles and disciples to continue his ministry now. Will we join in? Will we answer the call to see people as God sees them? Will we offer care and compassion and then invite the people to do the same? Will we join the harvest?

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