

SERMON: The Time is Ripe
TEXT: Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

I was born and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota, part of that major metropolitan area known as the Twin Cities. But I never really considered myself a city kid until I moved to rural Iowa to serve as a solo pastor after I graduated from seminary. United Presbyterian Church was in Goldfield, Iowa, a town of about 700 residents. As you might imagine, many of these people were farmers, and they were very patient with my ignorance about farming.

If you've ever driven through Iowa, you know that corn is the major crop. The cornfields are particularly beautiful in July and August, when the corn is tall and green. In my first year there, I was excited to hear about harvest and eager to experience it. I watched the fields and waited for the massive combines to begin the work of gathering the corn. Soon, the tall, green stalks began to turn brown, and it concerned me that nothing was happening. September came, then October, and the fields turned browner still. Obviously, there was something I didn't understand. Finally, I found the courage to ask the question. Mercifully, they did not laugh me out of the room.

This is not sweet corn we're growing, they explained. But those acres upon acres of crops that span across the state - that corn is used to feed livestock and to produce a fuel known as ethanol. It can also be used as an ingredient in many of the foods we eat, as well as in thousands of other products. In order to be used in these ways, the corn needs to dry out before it can be harvested.

I lived in Iowa for ten years, and there are many more things this city kid learned about small town life. But I laugh at myself every time I remember my concern that the corn was being ruined because it wasn't being harvested on time.

“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.* Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.”

For those of us who have gone to church most of our lives, the sheep and shepherd image is very familiar. But the image of harvest is not as prevalent or familiar. “The harvest is plentiful,” Jesus told his disciples, “but the laborers are few.” Clearly, there is work to be done, and not enough people willing to do it. What is not so clear is, what is the nature of that work? What are we to be harvesting?

In my study of this passage, I learned that the term *harvest* can occur in both a negative and a positive context. In the negative sense, harvest is the image used for the judgment at the end of the age, when the weeds are separated from the wheat. But in a positive sense, harvest refers to missionary outreach. This is the context of today’s passage. When Jesus refers to the harvest, it is a gathering that needs to happen for salvation, rather than a judgment and a separation.

As one scholar explained, “Jesus’ teaching, preaching, and healings are all motivated by compassion. Jesus sees the people as *harassed and helpless* (literally *oppressed and thrown to the ground*) sheep in need of a shepherd to defend and care for them. Matthew portrays Jesus as the compassionate shepherd caring for his sheep. Shifting to an analogy of a harvest, Jesus’ compassion for the people causes

him to recognize how abundant the harvest is and to acknowledge how great the need is for laborers. Compassion transforms the problem of oppression into an opportunity for deliverance. Jesus' plea to his disciples to *ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest (9:38)* foreshadows the summoning and commissioning of twelve disciples to go forth as *apostles (literally, those sent out)*. ... The arrival of God's kingdom is demonstrated by the deliverance of the oppressed - the sick being cured, the dead being raised, lepers being cleansed, and demons being cast out." (Guy D. Nave, Jr., *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3)

Too many people today are harassed and helpless. Oppressed and thrown to the ground. Too many of these are people of color. At times, the harassment is brutal and public, like the killing of George Floyd. But more often than that, is the subtle harassment and oppression that happens day after day in a wide variety of ways to people of color. When they go to work. When they go to school. When they apply for loans. When they try to rent an apartment or purchase a home. The stories are endless.

I think we all agree that it isn't right that people should be treated differently because of the color of their skin. Furthermore, it isn't right when people start

demonizing all police officers for the violent behavior of some. It isn't right when protesters loot and vandalize and become violent against others. It's not right when people go hungry because they lost their job during the pandemic shutdown. It's not right that healthcare workers don't have the equipment they need to protect themselves from infection with a deadly virus.

Let's face it. We are all harassed and helpless at times. We all have experienced some level of suffering in our lives. We all need compassion. Which is why the harvest that Jesus calls for is a gathering in, not a separating out. It seems like the more we suffer, the more we divide ourselves. When what we need is to come together to help each other. As has been proclaimed repeatedly throughout this pandemic, *we are all in this together*.

Let me repeat the words from the commentary I quoted earlier. "Compassion transforms the problem of oppression into an opportunity for deliverance."

Everything that is happening in our country and in our world is a sign that THE TIME IS RIPE for compassion and for gathering together. This reminds me of an old adage that many of you will remember: *United we stand; divided we fall*.

Some of the most beautiful and moving scenes of the past few weeks have shown police and protesters - black and white - coming together to talk, to listen, to stand together, to kneel together, to share a hug, to take off their masks, to put down their weapons, to see one another, to protect one another, to respect one another, to show compassion for one another, to be human together. THE TIME IS RIPE for this kind of harvest.

But the laborers are few. Jesus calls us all to join in the work of harvest. To transform oppression into deliverance. To cure the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse the lepers, to cast out demons. To bring about God's kingdom, *on earth as it is in heaven*.

I ran across a quote the other day from Richard Rohr, American author, spiritual writer, and Franciscan friar. He wrote: "Our physical and spiritual world is evolving, turning, transforming. The world is ready - and desperate - for us to let go of the illusion that we are separate and to come together to heal all divisions."

The harvest is plentiful. THE TIME IS RIPE. May we be laborers for the gathering... to the glory of God! AMEN.