

Laborers for the Harvest

You almost never hear the full panoply of the four-plus passages offered by the Lectionary from me on a Sunday and today you're not even hearing the full Gospel reading. But as I was preparing for this Festival Sunday and read the first paragraph of what can be a longer reading from the Gospel According to Matthew, I was seized by the feeling that this was exactly the Scriptural basis for what I needed to say today.

We've just spent a sizable chunk of our Worship Service celebrating those who've added to the life of this church over the past year. Some might find this exercise self-congratulatory, perhaps even inappropriately so during the hour each week we dedicate to the praise of God. Clearly, I disagree and I want to say why. When we recognize each other's gifts and toil, we are recognizing talents and skills given by God as well as a desire that comes from the same source, a desire to serve others and to help form a community.

Let us remember, first of all, that all good gifts come from God. That doesn't just mean the good things that come into our lives but also the good things that well up in our lives. When we talk about people who are gifted in a way that shows the activity of the Holy Spirit in their lives, we generally think about those who can heal with a touch or those who are great preachers or writers or musicians or artists. But in fact there are an abundance of far more homely gifts that also display God's love made manifest through us – the knowledge and skill required to fix the plumbing or to arrange simple items to beautifully adorn tables, for example.

And since Paul teaches that the greatest of the gifts is love, let us not forget the loving patience with which those who've been recognized today have offered their time and service. Whether it's teaching a class or driving donated food to its destination, cleaning the dumpster enclosure or hanging decorations in the Sanctuary, doing the banking or organizing the gardeners, all of these tasks have been performed in a spirit of love for this little example of the Beloved Community and for all those that we touch.

Consider Matthew's description of the reaction of Jesus to the crowds he encountered. "He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Is that not an apt description for most of the people we meet in our neighborhoods and schools today? There is an overwhelming sense of malaise, of threat, that pervades our country and beyond in 2017. But those you have heard thanked today, everyone here included, have helped to make this place a place of peace, a place where people come for surcease of mental anguish, at least for an hour or so each week. When we keep our building and grounds beautiful, when we offer meaningful learning opportunities, when music and prayers and readings are offered up in the spirit of love, then we are doing at least a part of what we can to remind ourselves and all who come to our campus that life can be something more than "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In other words, here is a place where the sheep may come to feel something besides "harassed and helpless." Even if all you do is come and participate, you are adding to the sense of well-being and abundance in this place. It's a lot more fun to be part of a full class or a worship service in a full Sanctuary, isn't it?

But what, you may be asking, does that have to do with sending out laborers unto the harvest? The answer is simple – we leave here every Sunday around noon or Wednesday nights around 8 refreshed and renewed to do the work God has called us to do in the world. For some, that

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means working with children, young people who need to see that someone cares, that they are valued. For others, it means helping their neighbors who need a hand or a hug. For some, it means giving the very best service to others that they can in their professions. For others, it may mean just being a faithful friend. For some, it may mean talking with someone who is grieving or searching or just lonely. For others it may mean serving a meal with love. We go from here renewed so that we may follow the dictate of St. Francis and “preach the Gospel at all time – if necessary, use words.” We are called to minister to each other in this place so that we can go from here and make our every act a ministry to our world.

Of course, I’m one of those who often resort to words to communicate the Gospel. If you ever find any of those words helpful and think they might mean something to someone else, I’d remind you that one of the quiet ministries that happens here every week is that my words are captured electronically and preserved in “the Cloud” and made available through our website. If you are one of those who have better ways to preach the Gospel than with words but are in temporary need of some words, feel free to share mine.

We are all blessed by all of us, are we not? Each one here and each one who has been a part of this community during the past 56 years has added something to this sliver of the Beloved Community known as Good Shepherd Baptist Church. But let us never forget that what we do to enrich each other’s lives here is for a greater purpose – that we carry those riches out into the world so in need of them. We are responsible not only for building a place of peace here but for expanding the borders of that peace wherever we go so that all of those harassed and helpless folk we meet every day may feel themselves loved and blessed and unafraid. Thanks be to God.