

## Laborers in the Harvest

Matthew 9:35-10:8

One of the surprise breakout movies this year is *The Sheep Detectives*. After a group of sheep discover their shepherd has been murdered, they work together to solve the case. They can do so because their shepherd read murder mysteries to them every night, and so they know what they need to do to solve the case. The challenges come from the fact that they're sheep, and they have to convince the humans to do the investigating and to put the clues together. While they succeed in the end, they also show that they need a shepherd. They've never left their meadow, and struggle with crossing the road. They can't protect themselves from a neighboring shepherd who is partnering with the local butcher to raise sheep for meat, not just wool. They can't protect themselves from wolves. They can be on their own for a time, but to truly have an abundant life, they need a shepherd. And in the happy ending, they get one.

That's what Jesus sees as he looks out at the crowd. He sees sheep without a shepherd. And as one of my pastor friends says, "What do you call sheep without a shepherd? Lunch!" That's right: lunch. The Bible warns us that "your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). One of my theology professors reminded us that the devil is more like a panther, though, hiding in the shadows ready to pounce when we least expect it. The threats in this world are numerous. Without a shepherd to protect them, the sheep are going to die or scatter to starve in the wilderness.

Sheep need a shepherd. So, what did Jesus do for the "harassed and helpless" crowds? First, he told his disciples to pray for more shepherds;

then he called the twelve apostles to be shepherds over his flock. Earlier in the chapter we find the call of Matthew. Back in Matthew 4 we see the calling of the fishermen; Peter, Andrew, James, and John. After the prayer for more workers, we see them sent out. They pray, and then are the answers to their prayers.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. A survey a couple of years ago revealed fifty-eight percent of Iowans attend religious services less than once a year. Just 23% of Iowans are going to a house of worship on a weekly basis. Students come from all over the country and all over the world to Ames. While some are seeing an uptick in religiosity among younger people, especially young men, there's debate over if young men are becoming more religious or they're just not leaving as quickly as young women. Political scientist Ryan Burge notes that recent surveys have shown that Christianity's decline has plateaued, and that Gen Z seems only slightly less religious than the millennials. Nones, the share of Americans who claim to be atheist, agnostic, or have no religion in particular has continued to decline, from 36% in 2021 to 32% of the population in 2024.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. There are literally tens of millions of people in the United States who do not believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They are literally without hope in this world unless someone preaches the Word of God to them. But there aren't enough pastors, missionaries, and evangelists to get the work done. So, what does Jesus ask his Church to do? To pray for more workers in the harvest.

I have a pastor friend who likes to call this The Lord's Other Prayer. We know the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. But that's not the only prayer Jesus gives his disciples to pray. He also tells us to pray for more laborers in the harvest—more pastors, teachers, evangelists, and missionaries to preach and teach the Gospel of salvation.

The Bible says that God gives pastors to the Church. The Office of the Holy Ministry is a gift to God's people. The sheep need a shepherd. So, God supplies: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..." (Ephesians 4:11-12). Pastors are a gift sent by God to feed, lead, and equip God's people. Of course, this takes a bit more importance to us in these coming days, as we prepare for Pastor Mark's retirement and going through a vacancy and call process.

The idea of a congregation without a pastor is as absurd as the picture of a flock of sheep without a shepherd. And the idea of an individual Christian not being part of a congregation led by a pastor is doubly absurd. The Bible is very clear that people in the Church need each other. We need fellowship, (koinonia)—life together. A life apart from the Body of Christ ends up as spiritual death. There are no lone ranger sheep out in the world. Why not? Because a lonely sheep is a dead sheep. Remember, sheep without a shepherd are called lunch.

When farmers harvest their crops, there are lots of different jobs that needed to be done, and the church isn't any different. There are many people who support the mission and ministry of our church. The LCMS recognizes 8 church

work vocations: pastor, Lutheran school teacher, director of Christian education, director of church ministries, director of Christian outreach, director of family life ministry, director of parish music, and deaconess. The Office of International Missions recruits others to support the work of missionaries, such as project managers, communication specialists, volunteer coordinators, and business managers in addition to theological educators, teachers, church planters, and deaconesses. Others are volunteers, such as president, treasurer, Sunday school teacher, snack server, and lightbulb changer. Judy Newhouse has been doing some praying for VBS volunteers as the number of kids registered for our Vacation Bible School keeps rising. All of these are important roles for the proper function of the church. Every member in the Body of Christ matters.

Yet the sad reality of our time is that very few men seek the noble task of the call to ministry. Quite plainly, pastors are becoming a dying breed. Across denominations in America, pastors are retiring from the ministry faster than they are entering it.

When I began studying at Concordia Seminary in St Louis, we had about 150 guys entering in the Fall 2003. We were the largest class in thirty years, and one of the largest classes since the 1950's. When we graduated four years later, in 2007, I had classmates who were waiting to receive their first call, and others were encouraged to continue on to further education. This year, one hundred fifty congregations asked for candidates to serve them as pastors. About seventy-five of those calls were filled between both LCMS seminaries, St Louis and Fort Wayne. It's sad and discouraging, especially for those congregations who asked for a pastor and did not receive one. What are

they to do? Congregations need pastors, and pastors need congregations. And it's not just those hundred fifty congregations that needed pastors. About a thousand LCMS congregations are vacant, and we are producing less than a hundred new pastors every year.

This sounds dire. It sounds potentially catastrophic. What is the church to do? What are we to do? Now, as a side note, I should say that the situation isn't actually as dire as that sounds. There are pastors who want to serve who don't have calls now for a variety of reasons, and the vast majority of those thousand congregations are vacant because they are unwilling or unable to pay a pastor a living wage. Nevertheless, Jesus answers the question of what we are to do quite clearly in today's Gospel reading. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

The answer is to pray. The action demanded of the church is more than human busyness and effort. Yes, there are efforts to raise up more church workers through scholarships and other programs. Yes, there are efforts to make training more affordable, more online, more contextual. That will be one of the big areas of discussion at the LCMS National Convention in July. But new programs and approaches won't fully solve the problem. Praying reminds us there are things that need doing in the world that are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort and programs. Thoughts and prayers may be criticized as a response to tragedy or crisis, but sometimes it is all we can do.

Jesus promised Peter that He (Jesus) would build his Church (Matthew 16:18). And so he

will. He can do that with us or without us, but I pray that he will do it with us. So, what are we called to do? We are called to pray. Pastor Mark Gerken, the former missions executive for Iowa District West, had an alarm set on his phone that would go off at 10:02 every morning because of the Luke parallel of this passage, Luke 10:02. It was his reminder to stop and pray for workers in the harvest. You can do that too, or set it for 9:37 since we've heard Matthew's account today.

There is a pastoral shortage, and there always will be. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" will always be the Word of God. It will always be true. And the solution to this shortage will always be the same. "Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

The same Lord who calls pastors to His church who give out the eternal gifts of life and salvation is the one who Himself went to the cross to win those gifts for you. He suffered what your sin deserved. He won life and forgiveness for all people. He declared your forgiveness and the completion of all that was necessary for your salvation while hanging from the wood of a cross.

There is no crisis to be averted. The Lord's got this, and more importantly, the Lord's got you. He's got the nail marks to prove it. Rejoice, people loved by God. Your sins are forgiven, and you are free.

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