

Text: Matthew 9:35-10:1.

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

June 28, 2020.

Grace and peace are yours through Jesus. Amen.

Door County, Wisconsin is famous for cherries. One year, there were so many cherries the price plummeted to under ten cents per pound and it cost about six cents per pound to harvest them, to say nothing of shipping and packaging. So many owners of cherry trees didn't even bother to harvest. It wasn't worth it. Can you imagine? A bumper crop, going to waste. Trees, so full of tasty, plump cherries the branches can barely hold the weight and it all goes to waste. What a travesty, for a great harvest to go to waste. More recently and more locally, we've seen farmers dump, hundreds, thousands of gallons of milk, because schools were closed and restaurants are barely open and there just aren't enough people to drink the milk. What a tragedy! People go hungry and thirsty and this harvest goes to waste. Jesus described a similar problem, but a much more serious one. A plentiful harvest, but few workers. So many souls, 7.8 billion in the world, but a harvest of souls going to waste with no one to work it. Maybe we even think there are so many souls, it's not worth it trying to reach them. Or souls go to waste because we think there isn't a market for this message. But there's always a market for this message: Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus rose. There is no greater shame than a soul going to waste because that soul was ripe to hear and no one told them: Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus rose. Yes, the harvest of souls is plentiful. But the workers are so few. Let's pray for the workers. Let's talk to this harvest. Let's listen to Jesus when he says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few."

Jesus himself was an active worker in the harvest field of souls around him. He went around, constantly. He went to big places, cities, like Madison and Milwaukee today. Small places, villages, like Paoli and South Wayne today. Jesus cared for all, great and small. Jesus saw the plentiful harvest all around. Jesus worked the harvest over and over.

He went where you would expect to find people eager to hear the message: synagogues, gathering places, where people went to hear God's Word, much like churches today. Not surprising to find Jesus in a church. Not surprising to find Christians in a church. Not surprising to hear the message Jesus preached. Good news! Good news! Jesus brought the same good news we are still preaching today: Jesus lived. Your perfection problem is solved. Jesus died. Your sin problem is solved. Jesus rose. Your biggest problem of all, the problem of life and death, is solved. You have life. Eternal life. Yes, Jesus preached to all, great and small.

Jesus cared for all: body and soul. He healed. Personal touch. Some people Jesus healed had experienced no human contact for years due to their illness. Many people were in quarantine and had to shout out, "Unclean!" If anyone came near them. Maybe we can relate some, but to have that be your entire life, for your whole life? Jesus went around, teaching, preaching, healing, with a personal touch. I have a note on my desk that says, "Preach, teach, reach." Helps me focus on what's most important. Preach, teach, reach. Preach good news. Teach God's Word. Reach with a personal touch. That's what Jesus did. That's what we do today. Jesus cared for all, great and small. Jesus cared for all, body and soul.

Here's why. There were people, precious souls, people for whom Jesus died, who were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Let's focus on that. Harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. People were harassed. The word literally means skinned, or flayed. The teachers at that time

only gave them laws, not good news. They focused on man-made laws, not God's kingdom and his love and grace. The people were faint from lack of spiritual food. They heard no Gospel, no grace, no good news. The shepherds who were supposed to be feeding them were wolves, eating their souls.

They were helpless, skinned and lying wounded on the ground, easy harvest for wolves, not a plentiful harvest for God. They were thrown away. They were sheep! Helpless. Hopeless. Harassed. They needed a shepherd, and none was to be found.

That's us! And maybe we don't even realize it. Helpless. Hopeless. We need a shepherd. But we don't think so. "Hey, God is ok, but I'm not much into this organized religion stuff. I don't need a pastor to tell me what to do. I talked to my friends and they agree with me. Pastors are just on power trips to get people into their churches, to get more money, more fuel for their egos, more seats in the seats so they can feel good about themselves. I can worship on my own. I don't need a shepherd." Let me confess before I convict. I'm not a perfect shepherd. My mouth isn't always filled with good news. I'm sorry. But what about you? Have those thoughts been in your mind? Have you ever thought you can do the God thing by yourself, be your own boss, lead Jesus around, don't need to listen to a church or even a Bible because I've got this figured out. My friends, we are sheep. We are harassed and helpless without a shepherd.

Thank God he sent the perfect shepherd: Jesus. I know we had Good Shepherd Sunday just a few weeks ago, but can we ever hear too much, "Jesus laid down his life for the sheep"? Jesus had compassion on these crowds. He was sick to his stomach for them. He hurt on the inside. So he did what needed to be done. Jesus lived a perfect life, for you, precious sheep. He poured his perfection over you in baptism. Jesus died, for you, helpless sheep and fixed the problem of sin we could never fix on our own. Jesus rose, rock solid, eternal evidence of this good news: I will rise. I will live. I have eternal life. No wolf can pluck me out of the Good Shepherd's hand. The harvest of my soul was so precious to Jesus he gave up heaven and came to earth so I will be with him in heaven. You mattered so much to Jesus, no sacrifice was too great, not even his own life, his own death, he gave it all up, just for you. He saw you were helpless, and he helped you. He saw you were harassed and he rescued you. He saw you were hopeless and he gave you hope. If this seems repetitive, I won't apologize. If you've heard this good news before, hear it again. Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus rose!

The harvest of souls who need that message is plentiful. The workers to spread that message and bring in that harvest are so few. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Let's start with the harvest here. 410 members of Resurrection, each one a precious soul! What a harvest! A harvest that started with a few seeds over twenty years ago when brave missionaries came to Verona. Then brave missionaries went to Mt. Horeb to work the harvest there. And thirty souls sowing seeds to harvest are now over 150 souls, continuing to sow seeds to harvest more souls. Then brave missionaries strengthened ties in Monroe. And more brave missionaries are planning to work the plentiful harvest in Fitchburg. And that's just our congregation.

Talk about a plentiful harvest in our communities. The average church in the United States has 100 in attendance. So about ten churches in Verona, means 1000 of 10,000 people in church. That sounds like a harvest of 9000. Twenty churches in Monroe, 2000 of 10,000 people in church. Still sounds like a big harvest. 17% of people in the United States attend at Christian Church. 328 million people in the country. That's over 270 million souls harassed and helpless, needing good news, needing a shepherd. And 7.8 billion people in the world! It's staggering how plentiful the harvest is. Like Door County cherry

trees, just sagging with low-hanging fruit.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Jesus sent 11 men into the entire world and told them to tell everyone. And he didn't have a plan B. Talk about going all in on eleven guys. And Jesus has gone all in on us. Jesus still doesn't have a plan B. He wants us to work the plentiful harvest. And the workers right now are getting fewer, in our church body and in others. In some Christian churches, churches are closing just because there's no worker. That sounds like letting cherries rot because there's no one to harvest. In our own church body, the number of pastors reaching retirement age every year has been over 40 for a decade and the number of new pastors from the seminary every year for a decade has been less than thirty. You don't have to Einstein to realize 40 is ten more than thirty and a decade of ten a year equals 100. And it doesn't look like it's going to change real soon.

What a problem! Such a plentiful harvest. So few workers, and the harvest getting more plentiful and the workers getting more few. What's the solution? Jesus gives it. Ask. Ask! Beg. Pray. Fascinating. Jesus didn't say, "I'll take care of it. Don't worry." Jesus did say, "You ask. You beg. You pray." Pray to the Lord of the harvest. He wants all to be saved. The Lord of the harvest sends out workers. The LORD of the harvest calls them. We've been so blessed to be part of this training and sending through having vicars, assistant, student pastors at our congregation. The Lord of the harvest has used us. He's sent workers from us to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; Lakewood Ranch, Florida; Prescott, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Kenai, Alaska; Appleton, Wisconsin; and just recently New Ulm, Minnesota. Yes, that actually is where the vicars of Resurrection are serving. They are the answer to this prayer.

But you are also the answer to this prayer. Yes, you! Here's something else fascinating about this prayer. Jesus told them to pray. Then Jesus called them to be the answer. Stop and think about that. Jesus said, "Pray!" Then Jesus sent them. Wait! God, I ask for things in prayer. I'm not the answer. God, I'm at least part of the problem, that's why I pray. I'm not the solution. Not with this prayer. God asks those who pray to be the answer. God asks the helpless sheep to consider being called as a shepherd, one of the few workers in this plentiful harvest. Is there a young man next to you, or at a safe social distance from you, that could be one of these workers, a shepherd to helpless sheep? Ask him to think about it! Pray for God to send him! Mom and dad, wouldn't you weep with joy to see your child in a pulpit, preaching good news of God's kingdom to sheep who won't have eternal life without it? My parents heard my first sermon so many times, they had it memorized.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. But you know there's nothing better than your own harvest. Door County cherries going to waste, that stinks. Wisconsin Dairy farmers dumping milk hits closer to home. But what about your own harvest? Nothing tasted as good to me as cucumbers from our own garden, my dad's garden I mean. Fresh and crisp. Not like someone else's harvest in the grocery store. What about your own harvest, in your own backyard? What could be sweeter than bringing your children to Jesus, what more precious than seeing your family rest in the arms of the good shepherd, more wonderful than a neighbor to whom you told the good news: Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus rose. That plentiful harvest is all around us. And you get to be one of the few workers. Amen.

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