

PLENTIFUL

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

November 18, 2018; Non-Lectionary Sermon

Leviticus 19:1-10; Matthew 9:35-38

***“Then he said to his disciples,
‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few...’”***

Matthew 9:37

“O beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain.”

For many of us, that line sums up the promise of America: a land of prosperity and plenty: with that prosperity deeply rooted in the earth.

It’s something we’re well aware of, here in Somerset and Hunterdon counties. Farming’s been a way of life here for generations. But you don’t have to travel very far from here to find people who think food comes from the supermarket, wrapped in plastic, enclosed in colorful cardboard boxes or cans, or frozen into little bricks.

The Kentucky novelist and farmer, Wendell Berry, calls that “a profound failure of imagination.” Most of us, he writes:

“...cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history beyond the farm. Most people cannot imagine the forest and the forest economy that produced their houses and furniture and paper; or the landscapes, the streams and the weather that fill their pitchers and bathtubs and swimming pools with water. Most people appear to assume that when they have paid their money

for these things they have entirely met their obligations.”¹

Claire I and I spent nearly six years living in Dubuque, Iowa, in the late 1980s. I was working for one of our theological seminaries as Director of Admissions and Assistant Dean, while she was earning her Master of Divinity degree. We lived in a small city, but we were very aware — as was everyone who lived there — that surrounding us on every side were vast agricultural lands. Our very city was located along the mighty Mississippi, that great, watery highway for barges that carried the produce of the land to market.

Until you’ve seen for yourself the size of those farm fields, you simply have no idea. I would go on student recruitment trips throughout the Midwest, many of them by car. I’ve seen more cornfields through the car window than you could possibly imagine.

Elsewhere in the Midwest, it’s not corn, but wheat. I remember a trip I took through Kansas, which is a good deal dryer than Iowa. The climate there is suited to wheat farming. The experience was much the same: two lanes of highway, straight as an arrow, flanked on either side by waving wheat, far as the eye could see. Truly, “amber waves of grain.”

¹Wendell Berry, “In Distrust of Movements”

It's hard to imagine what the harvest must be like, when the farm fields are so vast. Most wheat farmers, I've learned, don't harvest their own fields. They rely on itinerant farm workers known as custom harvesters.

Now, if you're picturing migrant workers such as we know here in the truck farms of New Jersey, you're very much mistaken. These aren't impoverished, hard-working people who bend low to the ground and pick vegetables by hand. No, the custom harvesters of the Midwest are a different breed altogether.

They own their own equipment: huge, modern combines with air-conditioned cabs, that cost upwards of half a million dollars. Those machines are so expensive, it's not cost-effective for any individual farmer to own one. The way to recoup your money, after buying a combine like that, is to run it as much as 18 hours a day for nearly half a year. That means you get out of the farming business yourself and start harvesting the crops of other people.

These are often family businesses. The more prosperous among the custom harvesters own six or eight of these agricultural behemoths. They hire drivers to operate them — young men from farming communities who live on the road for a few years, as a grand adventure.

They're away from home six or eight months of the year — traveling in huge caravans from job to job, the massive harvesters followed by campers and

semi-trailer trucks loaded with equipment. The harvest starts in Texas or Oklahoma, moving slowly north until they end up at the Canadian border, or even beyond..

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few — which is not a problem if your stock in trade is half-million-dollar combines.

It wasn't that way in the time of Jesus. When he says — as he does, here in Matthew, chapter 9 — “the laborers are few,” it's a farm crisis he's talking about. What good is it to have a bumper crop if there's nobody to bring it in! The produce will only rot in the field. The farmers will face economic ruin.

In Jesus' time — as it's been for much of human history — the harvest was a community enterprise. When farm fields were small and plowed by hand, those who worked the land depended on their neighbors to bring the harvest in. They would help each other, moving from farm to farm in a local community, aided by as many hired hands as they could summon.

Jesus isn't talking about agriculture, of course. It's a metaphor. He looks out over the crowds of people who've been following him around, hanging on his every word. He perceives them to be “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

It's an image that pops up several times, in various places in the Hebrew scriptures. The prophets portray the wayward people of Israel as sheep wandering aimlessly over the hills, with no shepherd in sight.

The great shepherd of Israel, of course, is King David — but he's long gone. Those glory days are but an ancient memory. David was the ideal king: a man of the earth who was both a man of God and a man for God's people.

When Jesus sees this sorry lot gathered around him, he feels “compassion” for them. The Greek word for compassion — *splagnizomai* (I love to say that word) — is a colorful one. It's related to the word for “bowels” or “gut.” When Jesus sees these poor people, desperate to connect with God, he feels for them in the deepest possible way. His compassion is literally a “gut feeling.”

A few verses on, he abruptly changes his metaphor. The people are sheep no longer, but waving ears of wheat, bending low from the weight of their kernels. If somebody doesn't come and do something about this situation, and quickly, the results are going to be catastrophic.

Jesus needs laborers. No one in his day could possibly have conceived of a half-dozen John Deere harvesters, each one big as a house, rolling side-by-side across the prairie. No, what he's talking about is a small army of laborers, sickles in hand, manually cutting down the wheat stalks and binding them into sheaves.

He's talking, of course, about his twelve disciples. Their training is now complete. They'll soon become his fellow-workers. Not long after this passage in Matthew, Jesus commissions them. He gives them authority to teach and to heal, sending them out, he says, "as sheep in the midst of wolves." There's good work to be done, good news to be shared, and he can't do it all himself.

There's a place for *you* in this work — the greatest work that ever was, or ever will be. Now, you may think church is all about singing hymns, offering prayers, listening to the choir sing and the preacher preach, and maybe coming away feeling "inspired." Yes, church is all these things, but that's only the half of it. Just as Jesus' disciples stopped studying the faith and started doing it, so you and I reach a similar place, eventually, in our spiritual lives.

It's the place of calling, the place of Christian vocation. The word "vocation" comes from the same Latin root as the words "vocal" or "vocalize." These, of course, mean "to speak." The speaking in the word "vocation" is our answer to Christ's call to serve. He says "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." He means for us to respond by saying "Here am I, send me!"

In a famous — and much-quoted — line, the preacher and novelist Frederick Buechner offers one of the best definitions of "vocation" ever. Buechner says our

Christian vocation is “the place where [our] deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

We’ve all of us got a vocation — or, at least, we’re meant to, if we’re going to be at all serious about this discipleship business. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 12, as Eugene Peterson renders it in *The Message*:

“Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

**wise counsel
clear understanding
simple trust
healing the sick
miraculous acts
proclamation
distinguishing between spirits
tongues
interpretation of tongues.**

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. [The Spirit] decides who gets what, and when.”

If God has called you to be a Christian, it’s a sure thing God has also given you spiritual gifts. These are the tools you use to help bring in the harvest. Some harvest jobs are churchy sorts of things: teaching children, singing in the choir, serving on committees, cooking food for church functions. Yet, if it’s truly a bumper crop we’re talking about, then the greatest portion of that work takes place on the other side of the stained glass.

Now, it may be the daily work you do is a way of carrying out your Christian vocation. There are all sorts of useful tasks out there, that meet the needs of others. There's honor in most every one of them. Some of these jobs deliver a paycheck. Others — like the all-important work of making a home and caring for a family — do not.

On the other hand, there's some work that doesn't seem to have a clear benefit to others (except, perhaps, for your employer). Yet, the very fact that you bring home a paycheck — or, if your income is from investments — that means you've got at your disposal something that's of tremendous value to the kingdom God: the money you contribute as an act of Christian generosity.

Paul really means it when he says there are all sorts of spiritual gifts out there. In Galatians 5:2, he lists “generosity” among the fruits of the Spirit. Generosity is a spiritual gift, in itself!

Now, there are some who say it's not right to do what I'm doing right now: talking about money in church. Money, as they see it, is somehow unholy — even dirty or unclean. When Jesus overturns the tables of the Temple moneychangers, they love to point out, he's doing that because money doesn't belong there.

But they're wrong. That's not why Jesus does it. Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers because they're cheating God's people — charging

exorbitant commissions to exchange their Roman coins for the Jewish ones that are acceptable as offerings.

Money, in Jesus' view, is not bad. It's simply part of the material world. It's morally neutral. When used to help others — to do God's work — it's a positive good.

So, if you have that gift of generosity, then an important part of your calling, as a Christian, is to offer up some of the money you've earned for God's purposes. You may not feel you're very good at teaching a Sunday School class or singing in the choir, but if you can write a check to help buy the curriculum, or to help pay the heating bill for the Sanctuary, that's a valuable contribution. You ought to be commended for it. Today, of all days, as we look back on a successful Consecration Sunday campaign, we *do* commend you for it — we say “Thank you.” By your giving, you identify yourself as one of the laborers for the harvest.

And what does that harvest look like? It's a kinder, gentler, world. It's a world that lives from the teachings of Jesus. The members of this congregation have a role in that: in making such a world. We depart the Sanctuary each week, and take the good news into our communities.

We live in a world filled with problems, but consider for a moment the even

bigger mess the world would be in, were there not places like this one: places where the laborers in God's harvest gather to be inspired and equipped for service.

Thank you for your part in making it all happen. Thank you for helping bring in the harvest!

Let us pray:

**Lord of the harvest,
all around us are fields of ripe grain.
The plentiful harvest is astonishing — and beautiful.
Beautiful, as well, is the opportunity to be a part of it.
May the faithfulness of our response to your call
be our song of praise!
Amen.**

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