

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 17, 2009**

WORKERS FOR THE HARVEST

Matthew 9:35-38

I am sure you have heard what the Session decided to make as our top priority for 2009: “To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to live an evangelistic life.”

How do you feel about what it takes to put that priority into practice? When it comes down to evangelism – actually telling others about Jesus – do you find it difficult?

Don’t tell your Pastor of Outreach . . . but I do! It is not that I do not care about telling people about Jesus. I do care. I talk to lots of people. But I often feel awkward. It is always hard starting to talk to someone, especially when it seems that not many people really are interested.

I share with many people, but no one seems very hungry. I’ve tried different evangelism methods and have employed quite a few outreach ideas – some here at Faith – but only a few came to know the Lord. Here in Fairfax County – a place ready to shed biblical values, typical of post-Christian America – there doesn’t seem to be much of a harvest.

Maybe your experience is different. Maybe lots of people are coming up to you and wanting to hear the gospel. But not for me. What I experienced was so different than what Jesus claimed, when He said, “The harvest is plentiful.” I thought that we saw so little fruit from our evangelistic efforts because our harvest field was barren – it really wasn’t plentiful!

But that’s not what Jesus said. Jesus said that the harvest was plentiful. God has been showing me that I have had the wrong perspective. I really haven’t seen things the way Jesus did and simply didn’t understand what Jesus was saying. A few weeks ago, I was away at a pastor’s clinic for Evangelism Explosion. The teacher said something that caught my attention:

Jesus said: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” If He’s telling the truth – and He is! – there’s nothing wrong with the harvest. The problem is with the workers.

Let’s unpack this passage together and see what Jesus means.

THE HARVEST

Verse 36 says: “When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Jesus saw the crowds. That was the beginning point of His compassion for them. It all started with seeing. Did you know that it is possible to look at something and see nothing at all?

A couple of years ago, a friend invited me to join him at Starbucks down in the Kingstowne shopping center. I had to go look up the address on the Internet because I didn’t know where it was. I’d been to the shopping center several times, but I’d never noticed the Starbucks. It was there, plain as day, but I

never saw it. Why? I don't drink coffee. Therefore, I wasn't looking for Starbucks, and since I wasn't looking for it, I didn't see it.

Jesus saw the crowds because He was looking for them. He went about the towns and villages of Galilee teaching and preaching and healing. He wanted to be around people. He didn't tune them out or put them at arms length.

In the verses just before our passage we see Jesus healing a woman and a couple of blind men, casting out a demon – even raising a little girl from the dead. He made Himself available to all sorts of people, folks who were broken and needy, hurting and demanding. And because He was around them, He was able to go beyond superficial niceties and really see them.

To see the crowds in our world, we must get to know the people around us. That may require a change. By nature we tend to hang around people who look like us, talk like us, act like us and go to church with us. We don't like to move out of our comfort zones. And we sure don't like to hang out with clingy, demanding people who might need something from us.

But if we are ever going to see the crowds as Jesus did, we must open our eyes and break the mold. The world is full of people who are not like us. The first step is to see them!

Jesus saw the crowds and He had compassion on them. The word means to feel it in your gut. When we talk about feeling something deeply, we talk about the heart, but in the first century, they meant something much deeper and lower. It means to be emotionally moved by what we see around us. Jesus was moved to compassion – His heart was broken by what He saw.

Have you ever had that happen to you? Have you seen or experienced something that hit you in the gut and deeply and permanently changed you? We got a glimpse of that as we heard how Mike Bittenbender was affected by serving the homeless in Washington, D. C., and had to do something about it. His experience so changed him that he'll probably never be the same.

I remember the first time I visited the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau in southern Germany in 1972. Dachau housed over 200,000 prisoners; over 25,000 were murdered. Since it was the second camp to be liberated by the British and American forces during World War II, it was and now remains open as a memorial. Ever since I walked through the camp, saw the films and pictures, I can't sit through a movie or TV show about the Holocaust without crying. Seeing the murderous effects of sin is part of why I'm in pastoral ministry today. Like Mike, my heart was broken by what I saw.

That's the problem of exposing yourself to the needs and problems of people. You can't help but have your heart get broken. But, if you stay aloof and apart from needy people, you'll wind up with a cold, hard heart.

So why was Jesus moved with compassion? What did He see? The text tells us that He saw people who were harassed and helpless. That's pretty graphic language – literally, He means they are mangled, whipped, skinned alive and then cast aside and left for dead. That's how He describes these folks who were like sheep without a shepherd.

Everywhere in the Hebrew Bible “sheep without a shepherd” are sheep who are lost. When Jesus looked out over the crowds – ultimately the whole world – His heart broke because He saw people who were spiritually lost.

What is the spiritual condition of humankind, anyway? Sometimes, we think of immorality. We see sinful behaviours and think the basic human need is a moral need. The church’s job is to encourage virtue. Faith becomes confidence in a moral order and faithfulness means loyalty to a biblical moral code. To be “lost” means to be morally adrift.

Today we aren't concerned as much with moral matters as we are psychological well-being. The basic human need is a psychological need. The human predicament is the failure of psychological integration, a lack of self-esteem or emotional wholeness. Faith is confidence in the psychological processes. To be “lost” is not to “have it all together.”

Be sure to understand that when our Lord’s heart broke it was *not* simply over moral or psychological matters, though He does care about these things. His heart broke because He saw the crowds to be spiritually lost. Yes, there are undeniable moral and psychological consequences to spiritual disorientation. Nevertheless, the basic human need is a spiritual need, living your days without receiving the gift of salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Being spiritually lost means not being in a right relationship with God.

Most of us have been lost geographically, unable to find ourselves on the roadmap. For us men, we may be too proud to ask for help. To be lost is not to be able to find your way ahead to your destination. And yet the person, while lost, who knows he is lost is only a step away from help. The person most thoroughly lost, most helplessly lost is the person who doesn't know he's lost and therefore is incapable of admitting it.

Jesus had compassion on those folks who did not know the gospel and were on their way to an eternity in Hell. They didn’t understand the good news that Christ had come and would die on a cross and rise again in order to pay the penalty for their sins and purchase a place in heaven for them.

The Lord saw people where they really were – in need of His salvation. He saw them and He knew their real need. Because of this He had compassion. Please understand what Jesus is saying. The world is full of people who are spiritually lost – harassed and made helpless by an enemy who would cast them down and leave them to die. As long as you close your eyes, you'll never see what Jesus saw. So we must pray, “Lord, open our eyes that we may see the world through your eyes.”

If you don’t see, you will not know.

If you don’t know, you will not care.

If you don’t care, you will not pray.

If you don’t pray, you will not see people come to Christ.

THE WORKERS

Verses 37-38 say: “Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.’”

Do you see the key word in verse 37? It's the little word then. Jesus saw, He felt, He knew. Then He called His disciples to action.

What did Jesus mean? He meant there were many people who need to hear the good news. Many people who He has made ready to respond to the gospel. All around us there are broken, bleeding, hurting people, ripped apart and left to die. They are ready to be reached if only someone will go to the harvest fields. In a parallel passage, John 4:35, Jesus rebuked His disciples who were reluctant to share their faith. "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."

The Barna Research Group is involved in gathering and analyzing information concerning the church. They have found that 33% of Americans are unchurched; they have no church affiliation whatsoever. 20% of those who have church membership believe that living a good life will gain them a place in heaven. Given those two statistics alone, that tells us that 53% of Americans are lost and on their way to Hell! That's startling. More and more people each year are added to this category. "The harvest is plentiful."

One of the greatest dangers of the American church is that we don't see this as the most important work we are called as a church to do. Almost everything else comes before the work of reaching the lost.

Jesus made a sad observation – the workers are few! The problem is not with the harvest, but with the workers. Harvest work demands harvest workers. Why are there so few laborers? Working in the fields isn't very glamorous. It's hot, hard, slow work. If we are going to become laborers in the harvest, it will require a major rearrangement of our priorities. Welsh poet David Whyte said it this way:

"I don't want to have written on my tombstone, when finally people struggle through the weeds, pull back the moss, and read the inscription there: 'He made his car payments.'"

Let's not allow that to be our legacy. Let's really work on our priority and work to equip and inspire each other so we all live evangelistic lives.

We are the workers in the harvest! Along with missionaries and preachers and pastors, every one of us here is a laborer called to the harvest field.

Where is the harvest for you? Most of the time, it's in your backyard – your family members, your neighbors and friends, the people with whom you work at the office or at your school. Some of them are clingy, demanding people who are harassed and helpless, with deep needs and problems only God can solve. They need the good news!

You are around people in need every day. Do you see them? Do you know their basic spiritual hunger? If they are lost, does your heart move with compassion for them? If you are a Christian, then God has put you as a worker in the harvest . . . and the fields are white for the harvest.

So what should you do? Get to know your neighbors and friends. Break out of your comfortable, familiar huddles and make yourself available to people in need. Be vulnerable and take the risk that you may not know exactly what to say or do. Learn how to share your faith in a simple, effective way.

We're offering a one-day seminar in September that can help you, so watch for that. But whatever you do, put yourself in a position so you can see what Jesus sees.

Surely we can see that people are in sad shape today, spiritually speaking. Surely we care about them and want to see them saved by the grace of God from an eternity in Hell. May we come to the place where we are not content just to see it, but may we come to the place where we become willing to go into the harvest. If we can ever come to see the harvest through His eyes, we will not be content to merely see it, we will have to enter it and work to see people saved.

If you don't see, you will not know.

If you don't know, you will not care.

If you don't care, you will not pray.

If you don't pray, you will not see people come to Christ.

But in our passage, Jesus gives one very specific command – pray! “Pray to the Lord of the harvest.” This is unexpected. We would think Jesus would say, the harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few, therefore:

Let's go out and hire some workers to do the evangelism, or hire a pastor for outreach.

Or let's form a committee and make some great outreach plans.

Or let's read books, attend conferences, or sing songs about reaching the lost.

Jesus does not mention any of those worthy things. The church's primary response to the needs of the world can be summed up in one word. Pray. The church is to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest fields, especially when those workers should be us! We plead and pray and earnestly beseech the Lord of heaven to stir His people to become workers in the fields.

I think we get it backwards. We should pray first, then organize. Pray first, then go. Pray for evangelism and missions first, then do the work. We pray to the Lord of the harvest because all things are by Him and through Him and from Him and for Him. He knows where the seed is planted. He knows when harvest has come. When God begins to open our eyes and break our hearts for the lost, the first order of business should be prayer. I confess, we as a church and I as one of your pastors have not been very good at keeping this straight. There's nothing wrong with the harvest. The problem is with the workers.

I will close with a story about something God did 150 years ago in New York City. It illustrates how God has started every harvest time in history, through the concerted prayer of His people.

In the 1850s, secular and religious conditions combined to bring about an economic crash. The third great panic in American history swept away a lot of wealth. Thousands of merchants were forced to the wall as banks failed, railroads went into bankruptcy, factories were shut down and vast numbers became unemployed. In October 1857, hunger and despair stared the nation in the face.

On July 1, 1857, a quiet and zealous businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier took an appointment as a lay missionary with the Dutch Reformed Church in downtown New York. His church was suffering from despair and a loss of membership. Burdened by the need, Lanphier decided to invite others to

join him in a noonday prayer meeting, to be held on Wednesdays from 12 to 1 o'clock, in the Consistory building in the rear of the North Dutch Church, on the corner of Fulton and William Streets. He circulated a handbill that read:

This meeting is intended to give merchants, mechanics, clerks, strangers, and businessmen generally an opportunity to stop and call upon God amid the perplexities incident to their respective avocations. It will continue for one hour; but it is also designed for those who may find it inconvenient to remain more than five or ten minutes, as well as for those who can spare the whole hour.

At twelve noon, on September 23, 1857, the door was opened and the faithful Lanphier took his seat to await the response to his invitation. Five minutes went by. No one appeared. The missionary paced the room in a conflict of fear and faith. Ten minutes elapsed. Still no one came. Fifteen minutes passed. Lanphier was yet alone. Twenty minutes; twenty-five; thirty; and then at 12.30 p.m., a step was heard on the stairs, and the first person appeared, then another, and another, and another, until six people were present and the prayer meeting began. On the following Wednesday, October 7th, there were forty intercessors.

Thus in the first week of October 1857, it was decided to hold a meeting daily instead of weekly. Within six months, ten thousand businessmen were gathering daily for prayer in New York, and within two years, a million converts were added to the American churches. The greatest revival in New York's history was sweeping the city – caused by an incredible movement of the people to pray. Before it was over, one out of every five persons in America made a profession of faith. That is what God can do when people begin to see the harvest through His eyes. Can you see? God help us to get a vision of what You can do!

This is what God has been teaching me these past few months. We are seeking to build a community of prayer for our friends and loved ones, our community and our nation, who need the Lord. Our hearts need to break for the lost and our broken hearts should drive us to our knees.

If you see, you will know.

If you know, you will care.

If you care, you will pray.

If you pray, you will see people come to Christ.