

# Lord of the Harvest

Psalm 23:1-6, Matthew 9:18-38

Jesus went about all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and infirmity. When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. What a wonderful summary and picture of the ministry of Jesus Christ. We continue to be the beneficiaries of his ministry yet today as it is brought to us through the reading and preaching of his word. And his ministry continues to be a model for our ministry, not just for ministers of the word and sacrament but, indeed, for the ministry of the whole church. As did he, so do we engage ourselves in teaching, in studying, in learning from the scriptures and from the word of God. The church has always done this. We continue to do it. It is a great privilege that today we have brought on board and introduced a new Director of Christian Education, Carolyn Meijer, who will help us, and lead us, and guide us in the educational aspect of our ministry—teaching and learning the word of God.

We continue to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and the gospel of the kingdom of God here and in every pulpit across the nation and around the world. This is the heart of Christian worship and this is how we spread the good news to all people. We continue to exercise ministries of healing. The Christian church has built hospitals around the world and healed countless thousands of people. We pray for and minister to and with those who are sick and continue to seek God's blessing and mercy and healing on them. And we are certainly grateful for the compassion of God to us in Jesus Christ, and we continue to extend that to each other—the ministries of love and caring and compassion, shepherding the members of the church. This is a good summary of the ministry of Jesus Christ, a good model for the continuing ministry of the church today.

Now one very striking thing about today's reading from the Gospel According to Matthew is the way the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel, stands up to and against all of the various enemies that attack human life. In today's reading we hear about attacks from death, disease, decay, decline, and even the demonic. One by one these challenges are made. One by one Jesus answers them all and demonstrates his power then and his continuing power now over these forces of evil.

First of all a ruler came in and knelt before him. A ruler of the people accustomed to having others bow before him, came in and humbled himself, and

knelt before Jesus saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand upon her and she will live.” And Jesus rose and followed him with his disciples. My daughter has just died, but you can make her live. What was this man thinking? Where did he get this kind of idea? He was thinking that Jesus Christ is stronger even than death. He was thinking that the grace of God was greater than the power of death, that final enemy. And he was thinking that the will for God for life exceeds the will of the enemy of God for death and he was right on all counts. Here we have a demonstration of the ministry of Jesus Christ, a very powerful ministry. He touches the dead daughter and takes her by her hand, and she rises from death to new life again. The man was right in his faith and what his faith consists of is sheer confidence in the power of God in Jesus Christ to meet all our human needs even the depths of human need in the death of a child.

He did not bring to Jesus his great accomplishments. He did not bring to Jesus his great wealth. He did not bring to Jesus his great goodness. He brought to him his need and his faith.

The death of his daughter and his sheer confidence that Jesus Christ who had also healed the sick could stand the face of death and defeat that final power also. And we have in him a model for faith ourselves.

Second, a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment. For she said to herself, “If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well.” If only this. It even sounds like superstition to us and maybe we want to say that her faith was not well-informed, or good, or perfect, but it was strong, and it was honorable, and it was sufficient. What was this woman thinking? She was thinking that Jesus Christ is stronger than disease. She was thinking that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is stronger than the power of sickness over our lives. She was thinking that the will of God for help far exceeds the will of the enemy of God for despair. And again she was right on every count. Jesus Christ, who is powerful enough to raise the dead, shows us here the personal aspect of his ministry. He was not content to allow the woman to be healed simply by the touching of his garment, but turned, and sought her out, and found her, and engaged her in personal conversation, and talked to her, related to her, and told her that her faith had made her well, not just her superstition, but her faith which he acknowledged and appreciated.

The third story we learn here in quick succession. Two blind men follow him crying aloud, “Have mercy upon us, son of David.” Do you catch the humor, the bizarre nature of what is going on—it is the two blind men that were following Jesus. Plenty of people who could see him perfectly well did not have the sense to follow Jesus, but two blind men follow him. And they even follow him into the house. How they did that I do not know, but the blind men follow and for the first

time, the blind men saw more than anyone else. They cried out to him, “Have mercy on us, son of David.”

This title is familiar to us. We have been over it many times. Recently at Christmas, there was an ancient prophecy from a thousand years earlier that God would preserve a son of David on the throne of King David. And we understand that Jesus Christ fulfills this prophecy. It is familiar to us, but it was new, and radical, and even dangerous to say out loud at this time and these were the first ones to say it. Two blind men saw who Jesus was when no one else saw who he was. They acknowledged him as the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the one that God was sending to right the wrongs in the world. What were these men thinking to shout out this kind of language on a public street? They were thinking that Jesus Christ is stronger than the decay that wracked their bodies and stole their sight. They were thinking that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is greater than the power of blindness. They were thinking that the will of God for light far exceeds the will of the enemy of God for darkness. And they were right on all counts.

Fourth, a dumb demoniac was brought to him. What was this man thinking? And what were the people who brought him to Jesus thinking? They must have been thinking that Jesus Christ is stronger than the demonic. That the grace of God in Jesus Christ is more powerful than the powers of the devil. And that the will of God for good is greater than the will of the enemy of God for evil, and again they were right on all counts.

These stories show us plainly, simply, concisely, the power of God in Jesus Christ over the gone wrongness of human life. They also show us time and again the correct attitude of faith on the part of those who would come to Christ. We bring to him two things—our neediness and our confidence that he can help. Not some vague or general faith. Not simply a belief in the existence of God, but a very precise confidence in Jesus Christ as the one who can, and will, and does meet our deepest needs. This is the faith which Christ receives, in which he rejoices.

There is something else going on here. Throughout this reading, throughout this ministry, throughout these healings there is being created and exacerbated an ongoing division among the people. There are at least three levels of this, and I want to call these to our attention.

First, there is a very simple division between the appreciative and unappreciative. After the dumb demoniac had been healed, the crowd said, “We have never seen anything like this in Israel.” The Bible does not say they were believers; it does not say they were followers; it does not say they were disciples; but they were almost there. They were ready to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were appreciative of his power, of his ministry, of his healing, and of his compassion. But not everyone was in that group. The pharisees did not like what

they saw, and they made a very nasty comment that if, in fact, Jesus had thrown out a demon, maybe it was because he was demonic himself. Maybe he was one of the head demons. Maybe he had power over the demons because he was the devil. There was a group of people who were unappreciative in the worst and most horrible way.

There is a second division between those who are believing and those who are unbelieving. We have read already of those who believe—the father who lost his daughter but knew she could be restored, the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years but knew that Jesus Christ could heal her, the blind men, the demoniac—we have examples of faith, but there is also the opposite of faith. When Jesus arrived at the ruler's home, it appears that the funeral had already started. The flute players were there, the professional mourners were there. This is an indication of the reality of the girl's death and of their confidence that she had died. And when he expelled them from the house and from the room, they laughed. They laughed in the face of the lord of life when he dared challenge the power of death. And they laughed in the face of the disciples when they preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And there are people still today who laugh derisively at the gospel that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. It makes no sense to them. It is ridiculous. It is stupid. It is much to be rejected. There are those who believe, and there are those who do not believe. Which are we?

There is a third division in today's reading. It is among the believers. It is between the obedient and the disobedient. It is among the believers that we have this third division. It is not the case that when people are made into disciples they immediately become good and perfect and willing disciples or even obedient disciples. Several people here give us good examples of faith and obedience and of following.

But look what happened with the two blind men who were healed. Do you believe I can do this? "Yes, Lord." "Yes" means "We believe," "Lord" puts them at his feet. In effect, they were kneeling before him. It does not say they were kneeling physically, but the words, "Yes, Lord" mean they acknowledge him as lord. "Yes, Lord." They were believing in what he could do.

But then he told them not to tell anyone, and they went out and told everybody. They disobeyed the one who had just given them their sight. And herein lies a great danger even within the Christian church and among believers—that somehow some days we think we know better than God. Somehow some days we think know better than Jesus Christ.

Matthew, in recording these stories, is interested in telling us about the power and the mercy and the majesty of Jesus Christ and the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is interested in telling us about these people that were healed. But he is also interested

in teaching us how to believe and how to obey. There are three divisions here. Each one of them is of significance not only for historical reasons—yes, they happened then—but also and even more so, for present-day reading. Are we appreciative or unappreciative? If we are appreciative, are we believers or unbelievers? And if we are believers, are we obedient or are we disobedient? This passage is like a mirror that is held up in front of us, and it invites us to examine our own faith and our own life.

Despite these divisions, or perhaps by means of these divisions, Jesus says to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful.” Despite these three divisions, which seem consistently and repeatedly to narrow the focus, despite these divisions, God intends to gather into his presence and into his kingdom a large harvest of many people from all around the world. People of every race and nation, of every climate and tribe, of every tongue and circumstance, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, black and white, God has created us for this. God has preserved us for this. God has prepared us for this. And now in Jesus Christ God is providing all that is needed for this to happen. God is providing all that is needed to forgive our sins. All that is needed to cleanse us from our guilt. All that is needed to heal our wounds. All that is needed to take away our sickness. All that is needed to wash away our fear. All that is needed to save us from ourselves. All that is needed to welcome us home to himself. Thanks be to God.

Jesus said the harvest is plentiful. The first good news I hear there is intensely personal. Because the harvest is plentiful, I am encouraged to believe that there is room in it even for me. I do not care if I am the last one brought in, as long as I am brought in. Lord, please do not leave me standing in the field. I am convinced that God intends to bring in a large harvest, not because we are all so good—not that at all—but purely for the sake of his son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, entirely despite our own personal unworthiness. We will be included for his sake, for his worthiness, for his life, and for his death. Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful.”

And the second good news I hear there is more than personal. For on those days when the church cannot see beyond itself, when all we can see has to do with our own failing programs or our own faulty discipleship or our own diminishing numbers or our own persistent sinfulness, all of which is say that when the church makes the fatal mistake of looking only to its own human realities and human resources, this word of Jesus Christ provides a word of correction and a word of hope even if there are few here now, the harvest is plentiful. Even if the church has not done its job as well as it could, God has big plans for the future. Despite appearances to the contrary, despite diminishing influence in an increasingly secular

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world, despite ongoing attacks by the enemies of Christ, the harvest is plentiful. This is our hope.

God is calling us to be a part of it. What will our answer be?

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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