

MCN Sunday, April 18, 2021
“The Harvest Is Plentiful, the Laborers Few”

Matthew 9:35-38—³⁵ And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

A group of Lutherans on tour in Xi’an (SHEE ahn), China had spent the day with a Chinese guide named Peter. As evening neared, Peter asked, “what is your Christian story?” The group hesitated to answer, knowing that proselytizing in China is against the law. Peter pressed the question and said, “I’ve heard from the Mormons, but really not much from Christians.” One member of the group finally explained the free gift of salvation in Jesus. It was the idea of “unearned love” that was the most confusing to Peter. How is it possible for there to be unearned love? It didn’t make sense to him.

From a worldly perspective, it is impossible to give without expecting something in return. When husbands and wives keep careful track of who does what, marriage can become a tit for tat experience. Individuals and even companies donate goods and services, but only if they receive some kind of credit for their “gift.” Christians and even Christian congregations can get caught up in thinking that there should be some kind of return on investment if they serve fellow Christians or the community at large. It seems crazy for our God to be so generous with his love and outlandish to consider the gift of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, knowing there is nothing to be offered in return. To the world, it doesn’t make sense.

In our text we see that Jesus is doing exactly what didn’t make sense. He is breaking all the conventional rules. He loves people who cannot pay, and he does it without constraint. In verse 35 we read:

³⁵ And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

You may have heard of Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins Sans Frontières*), a group who sends doctors to give medical care where none is available. Other organizations claim to serve without borders as well. We have Engineers, Cooks and even Acupuncturists without borders.

Although these groups all desire to serve everywhere, in reality they cannot. Jesus is God incarnate and he can and does operate without borders. During his earthly ministry, Jesus went where there was need and ignored social convention. As a result, he was criticized by religious leaders for going where he shouldn’t go and being in the company of those with whom he shouldn’t mix. In all his ministry, he displayed unearned love and gave freely to those who, in the eyes of many, didn’t merit his love. He healed the sick and fed the hungry and raised the

dead. Our text says that ³⁶“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” He did this because he is God and God is love. His love cannot be bought. It is freely given.

There can be no transactional relationship with God. We cannot play “tit for tat” with him. There is no paying him back for what he has done, and there is no bribing him to get something that we think we need or want. Jesus taught that a relationship with the Lord is more than a transaction. It is not buying God’s love but trusting in his love. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah and said:

“This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Matthew 15:8-9

Our Lord wants hearts, not empty words and deeds. Our God operates outside the rules of this world’s kingdoms.

When we think of a kingdom, we think in terms of a country with very specific borders. The king has authority over what happens in his jurisdiction and no further. Our text says that Jesus proclaimed the “gospel of the kingdom.” When we think of God’s kingdom of glory, we imagine heaven where Jesus will reign. But it is more.

Jesus is not a doctor without borders, he is a king without borders. He reigns over all. Instead of thinking about a finite kingdom, think of Christ’s dominion, his rule, his governance, his sovereignty and the fact that there are no borders to constrain him. He is the ruler of wind and wave...of sickness and health...of life and death.

The “gospel of the kingdom” becomes the good news of Jesus’s eternal reign over everything.¹ His kingdom is not defined by borders but by action! It is action in which we see unearned love on display over and over. Jesus sees the harassed and helpless and heals and comforts them. The gospel of the kingdom is about Christ’s action not simply for earthly problems. He came to heal the eternal sickness of death. This kingdom of action includes what happened on the cross where the king himself, in an unimaginable act of love, suffered the eternal punishment that every mortal being deserves. It doesn’t make sense.

And we rejoice at this incomprehensible truth.

We are the harassed and helpless, physically, emotionally and spiritually. We need the One who can heal in acts of unearned love. We need his divine providence. We need his forgiveness. We need the assurance of his eternal love.

¹ See Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, CPH, pp. 47ff. for more on “kingdom” as “reign.”

And we are not alone. Jesus looked at those around him and said to his disciples, “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.” Someone needs to go and help. Laborers are needed to go and bind up the broken and teach them and proclaim the gospel of the kingdom...the good news of Christ’s reign.

By faith, we have become the disciples of Christ who have the privilege of being proclaimers of the good news.² We do this with our children and our parents, with our friends and our co-workers. We do it with those we know and those we don’t know. We do it with our actions and with our words.

In America today, only 45% of the population attends church monthly or more,³ and 40% of millennials have ticked the “none” box, meaning they claim no religion. With the eyes of faith, we can see that there are harassed and helpless all around us. By the power of the Spirit, we also have compassion on them as we see how spiritually disoriented they are—“like sheep without a shepherd.” “The harvest is plentiful!”

While there is almost a 1 to 1 ratio in America of church to unchurched, we know that there are billions of people in this world who do not know Jesus. MCN is committed to sending laborers into those harvest fields. According to the latest statistics,⁴ Hong Kong is 11% Christian, China 5.1%, Taiwan 3.8%, Mongolia 2.2%, Thailand 1% and Cambodia 0.5%. In these places, and many others, are people who need to hear the gospel of the kingdom...the good news of love offered—love that can’t be earned.

As of today, MCN has over 40 mission partners who work in Asia, Central America, Central Europe and Africa serving with organizations who are in the harvest fields. MCN has, from its inception, focused on being able to intentionally proclaim the gospel. This has led MCN to various ministries, schools and churches around the world. Our own congregation has supported MCN work_____.

This work not only changes the lives of those who hear the gospel of the kingdom, but also those who proclaim it. In an exit interview, one MCN mission partner described how God worked in and through her:

Seeing how the first year’s thrill of newness and excitement gave way to the second year’s sense of acceptance and belonging still brings me great joy. I believe this was not only a testament to God’s skill at working *through* flawed and broken people like me, but also a reminder that he had been working *in* me all along, changing me and stretching

² But after we have become Christians through this Priest and His priestly office, incorporated in Him by Baptism through faith, then each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word which we have obtained from Him. Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary. LW 13:333

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

⁴ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/>

me and growing me. During the second year I began to more clearly see the difference He was making—both around me and inside of me.

This king without borders is already working both around us and inside of us to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. We are his instruments with those we see here at home and with those we support who are working far away.

“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.” Matthew 9:37-38.

