

The Gathering

“The harvest is now.”

Matthew 9:35-38

Last in the series: Stuck in the Mud (growing faith in God's garden)

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Lost

Daniel Boone was asked if he had ever been lost. You'd think the pioneer would have pointed to any number of times when the trees were so thick that he'd walked around in circles for hours without trail or landmark to count on. But he just said, "No, I can't say I was ever *lost*, but I was *bewildered* once for three days."¹

Would that the rest of us could be so self-assured. Think back to when it happened to you: your hand slipped out of the hand of a parent, leaving you in a sea of strange, towering faces.

Certain you knew the route, you took the turn for a shortcut that led to a gravel road and then to dirt, which narrowed and passed over a rickety one-lane bridge; then it was a two-track where the car was being swallowed by the encroaching trees and underbrush.

You straggled behind the tour group just for a moment to make a purchase and in a second the rest were gone. You became a stranger in a strange land, unable to speak the language, without knowledge of where you are supposed to be staying, where you could rendezvous, where you could turn.

Most of us, if not every one of us has a story with a sinking feeling; a helpless panic: overwhelmed, unequipped and without help. Lost.

Like sheep without a shepherd.

Ripe

This is what Jesus saw. Everywhere he went he saw multitudes of people who were (as the Bible story says) sick, harassed and helpless. Crowds made up of the children of God who were more than bewildered. Every one of them: loved by God with an incredible love. Few of them really knew it. They were lost.

Still, he moved among them with a single-minded mission. At all costs he was going to convince them that they were not abandoned. They were not forsaken. They were,

in fact, not lost at all. If they only could open their eyes to see beyond whatever the mess they were in at the moment, they'd see that they were already in the hold of God's love.

So he met them in the midst of their lost-ness. If it was illness – he touched them and made them whole. If it was hunger, he gave them bread. If it was insufficient knowledge about the love of God, he taught them. If it was too much bad news, he preached the good news.

He loved them so much he became the living proof of God's incredible love by what he did for them and by what he said.

His mission was compassion.

Scholars say this story comes in Matthew at a transition point of the Gospel. It's at the point when the story of Jesus' mission butts up against the beginning of the story of his disciples' mission. It's at a hand-off point like that stretch when the first runner of a relay race is running along-side the second runner and the baton is being handed over.

If Jesus' mission is compassion, he's introducing his friends to the work of compassion with him. He's beginning to hand over the mission. Like: he's not going to do this alone.

He's not going to change history alone.

He's not going to bring in God's time alone.

He's not going to make Heaven on earth alone.

He'll have disciples working with him.

Jesus saw the crowds and thought them as sheep without a shepherd. Matthew's first readers would have read this and thought right away of the Book of Numbers in the Hebrew Scriptures, when Moses, the shepherd of his Israel, was preparing for his death. There needed to be a new leader so the people wouldn't be like a sheep without a shepherd.² These people needed a shepherd. The leaders they had weren't caring for them – not really. They needed someone, or some group who would have his compassion and take on his mission of leading them home to God.

Then, when he said something, he changed his metaphor and referred to the crowds like they were a crop ready for harvest. This was metaphor of a harvest which Jesus friends and Matthew's first readers would have been familiar with. It was used as a reference for Judgment Day – the day that was to be the fulfillment of history when everything would be made right in the eyes of God.

So here were all these people who were hurting, bewildered, and lost: who more than anything wanted the hope and the assurance that a new day coming when they would be rescued and healed. They were ready to hear: and their readiness was an indication that God's new day had come.

“The harvest is plentiful,” he said, “but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

So Jesus was telling his disciples that the Day of the Lord was not far off: it was now. The time for the harvest was at hand.

And it is now.

Harvest work. Time for you and me to get into it: and pray to God and work for more to join us.”

If I'm hearing Jesus right, he wasn't just suggesting that you do something nice for someone because it will make you feel good.

This was his mission and he's handed it to you and me just as much as much as he handed it to Peter, James, Martha, and Mary.

Harvest work is not volunteer work. It's the work of God. It's the result of being chosen, authorized, and sent by God through Jesus.³

People are hurting and lost and are ready to hope if they'd only know how.

Whether you agree with our elected leaders' decision or not, the new austerity budget we're going to be living with in Michigan will present new challenges for both the very poor and our kids in school. How might we do the work of harvesting to bring them the compassion of Christ? Could that be the work of Jesus' laborers?

Greater Detroit is one of the most diverse urban centers in the world. Yet this one economic and social community ranks number one in racial segregation and number five in economic segregation in the country. We are divided into 240 separate municipalities all of which are largely independent and bear little responsibility for the rest – especially for people who are marginalized. How might workers in the harvest bring the compassion of Christ to bear – here? Could that be our calling?

And all among us are people who are lost, really lost. They have a hard time knowing which way to turn through life. They carry burdens, wrestle with guilt and hurt, injustice and the effects of unhealthy choices. They have only a vague notion of God and hardly any awareness of what Jesus has done for them.

You are in the midst of them. They are the harvest. Can it be that you are chosen, authorized, and sent to them by God through Christ?

Last week you heard a few of our church members talk about growing in discipleship as a life-long pursuit. I'm so grateful that they said what they said. Our children need to know how to follow Jesus and take part in his mission. You and I need to continue growing in skill and in heart.

Our spiritual formation cannot be complete until we see the real spiritual and life needs of real people at hand and engage them with Jesus' mission of compassion.

There is nothing un-urgent about it. This is the harvest.

People need healing.

People need relief and joy and fulfillment that can only be met in faith and love that comes from knowing God.

The sheep need shepherds. The harvest needs to be brought in.

Harvest

If you were to drive to the west side of Michigan you'd enter the fruit belt where rows of apple and cherry trees accent the hills. A week or two ago their blossoms decorated the place like a wonderland and filled the air with sweet scent. In a few months migrant workers will travel north to the same Michigan hills as the trees' fruit hang heavy on the branches.

One year I was asked by a small ecumenical group of concerned priests, pastors, and nuns to tour the migrant camps owned by one of the farmers in the area. We walked through poverty where buildings were not up to code and living conditions were harsh.

Talk about being bewildered. How could wealthy land owners allow this kind of squalor to exist on their farms? How could we do anything other than bring out the news reporters and point our fingers at the unjust?

But I knew the farmers. I knew their faith and their predicament. I knew how they invested in their camps when they could only to have a few of the tenants vandalize and steal. I knew how their life style was not like the rich; and how so much of their assets were tied up in land, equipment, and payroll. And I understood how regulated food prices that ensure all of us the good life kept their profit margins low.

My group talked about all this: how poverty is unjust. And we concluded that it wasn't just the farmer. It was all of us who were really responsible. If there was sin, we all had a share in it.

So instead of ranting in front of television cameras we decided to start a mission. Groups of people from churches far and wide were invited to come and share in it. People from our churches joined in their work. We opened our churches for places these groups could sleep; we gave them our hospitality.

We were all workers in God's field.

There was one farmer who owned a small operation whose migrant camp needed a lot of work; but he didn't have the means to bring it up to standard. There was no way he could have operated that year. His trees would have born the fruit, but never be picked from the trees. It would have hung on the branches, dropped, and rotted on the ground.

A group worked with him. They helped him buy the materials and he joined them in making the repairs. The camp was restored. He was able to operate. Migrant families were given the work they counted on to live.

It was grace.

There was a harvest.

And in a way, God's heaven appeared on earth.

Compassion. May you be a laborer in church and beyond church. We've got a big harvest at hand.

¹ Kasha Linka, Paw Prints Anecdotes. <http://www.geocities.com/~KashaLinka/boone.html>

² M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol. VIII*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 252.

³ Ibid.