

*Help Wanted.*

Compassionate individuals needed for demanding work. Applicants should be prepared to bring healing where there is hurt, hope where there is despair, and signs of new life where people have forgotten that new life is even possible. Travel required. Difficult people guaranteed. Compensation not specified. Experience preferred but not required.

Anyone here want to apply?

Truth be told, today's gospel reads like the world's least attractive help-wanted ad. Jesus wants to send people out to confront evil, to bring hope to exhausted communities, and to trust that God will do remarkable things through them. Then, just as we might hope for more reasonable expectations, he speaks of healing the sick and raising the dead.

Which honestly does not sound like a very stable career path, and more like something requiring a lot more spiritual jujitsu than I possess. And yet, somehow, Jesus seems convinced that ordinary people are exactly who he needs.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus looks out at the crowds, he is moved with compassion. He sees people who are *"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* There is heartbreak in those words.

And I wonder if Jesus would use the same words if he stood with us in this time right now.

Because people are tired. Not merely tired in the sense that they need a vacation, but tired in that deeper place where disappointment and anxiety begin to settle in. People who never imagined that ordinary necessities of living would cost what they cost. People grieving losses they didn't choose. People are carrying fears for the futures of their children and grandchildren. People are wondering what kind of world we are leaving behind.

Beneath all that lies another loss, one harder to name: the loss of trust. Trust in institutions. Trust in leaders, churches, experts, and even in the truth. Trust in our established systems. Sometimes, even trust in one another.

So, when Matthew tells us that Jesus saw people who were harassed and helpless, I don't imagine him shaking his head *at them*. Instead, I imagine him grieving *for them*. Because sheep without shepherds are not bad sheep. They are vulnerable sheep—oppressed, downtrodden, beaten down. They are sheep who have had to spend too much time taking care of themselves.

The prophets had spoken about such things for centuries. Ezekiel had condemned the shepherds who fed themselves rather than the flock. Leaders who cared more about preserving their position than tending the people entrusted to them. Jesus sees the damage that kind of leadership leaves behind.

Perhaps Matthew's first hearers understood this better than we do. By the time this gospel was written, Jerusalem had fallen, and the Temple had been destroyed. With the center of religious life gone, communities were trying to figure out who they were and how they were supposed to live. They wondered who they could trust to help, to lead, to care.

In other words, they knew what it was like to be harassed and helpless.

And it feels like we know something about that, too. Not because our circumstances are the same, but because we know what it feels like when the future seems less certain than it once did. We know what it feels like to lose things we thought would always be there.

Psychologist Martin Seligman's research shows that repeated disappointment can teach people not to hope too much. He calls it "learned helplessness." After enough losses, people stop expecting things to change.

Every empire, every system, every culture that benefits from fear and resignation depends in some way on people settling for the world as it is. This is precisely what makes Jesus' message so radical.

Perhaps that's what Jesus saw—not weak or faithless people, but people who had been disappointed long enough to forget how to imagine that things could be different.

But Jesus refuses to accept that weariness gets the last word. He does not scold people for being tired. He does not accuse them of lacking faith. He does not tell them to work harder or believe harder.

He simply has compassion for them.

And then, just when we might expect him to say, "Move over. As the leader. As the Messiah, I'll handle it myself," he does something almost absurd.

He gives the work away.

Not to scholars. Not to saints. Not to people with impressive résumés. He chooses fishermen and tax collectors and hotheads and doubters and people who, all of whom, seem wildly underqualified. If I were the HR manager, I might have suggested widening the search.

But maybe that's the point.

Because Jesus doesn't seem particularly interested in impressively qualified people. He seems more interested in available people. People who are willing to love. People who are willing to learn. People who are willing to fail, be forgiven, and try again.

Which is good news, because inadequacy as miracle-workers is one thing most of us have in abundance.

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine observes that *Jesus forms communities, not heroes*. Perhaps that's because Jesus knows something we humans are forever forgetting. Whenever we start believing that one person will save us, things usually go badly.

Savior has already been taken as a job title. And thank God for that.

Because none of us are qualified for that position either.

Jesus doesn't recruit replacements. He gathers companions.

And that means we find ourselves in two places in this story. We are the sheep, and we are the laborers. We are the ones who need care, and we are the ones being sent to care for others. We are the weary, and we are the companions.

Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, "*God uses all of us, despite our limitations, to mutually minister to one another.*"

Mutually.

Nobody simply gives, and nobody simply receives. Sometimes, we carry someone else's faith. Other times, they carry ours. There are days when we provide the meal and days when we are grateful to receive it. Sometimes, we are strong; sometimes, we are frightened.

You know, most days, discipleship does not look very dramatic. Most days it looks like showing up. And in this weary time, choosing hope is itself a kind of resurrection. And it is certainly an act of resistance.

Paul understood something about that. Writing to followers in Rome he says that *suffering produces endurance, endurance shapes character, and character gives rise to hope*. Not because suffering is somehow good, but because God refuses to abandon us to it. Hope, Paul says, does not disappoint us, because God's love has already been poured into our hearts.

And perhaps that is the most important thing of all. God does not wait for us to become stronger, wiser, or more qualified before loving us. "*While we still were sinners,*" Paul writes, "*Christ died for us.*" Long before we knew how to trust in God, Christ had already claimed us in love.

Which may be why Jesus seems so willing to entrust extraordinary things to ordinary people. The disciples are not sent because they are perfect. They are sent because they are loved.

Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill famously said, "*All politics is local.*" I think it is the same for discipleship. All discipleship is local, too.

Jesus does not send disciples out to fix the Roman Empire. He sends them to the people right in front of them. Discipleship rarely happens in the abstract. It happens around kitchen tables

and hospital beds. It happens in choir rehearsals and coffee hours. It happens when we welcome, when we pray for one another, and when we refuse to give up on each other.

Discipleship happens here, among us. Not in an ideal church, and not after we have all the answers. It happens now and with us. It happens at this time, with our gifts and limitations, questions and losses, and whatever hope we can find.

Jesus wasn't looking for perfect disciples then, and I don't think he's looking for perfect disciples now. He's simply looking for companions. For active participants in God's mission of healing, restoration, and justice.

So perhaps the help wanted sign is still hanging.

Compassionate individuals needed. No extraordinary qualifications required. Experience in disappointment considered an asset. A willingness to love, to forgive, to hope, and to begin again preferred.

Because the Good Shepherd is still gathering companions.

And Christ is still sending ordinary people into a weary world, trusting that love will be enough.

And somehow, by God's grace, it is. Amen.