

Help Wanted! Reading: Matthew 9:35-10:8 Proper 6/A 6/18/17
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“Help Wanted!” That pretty much sums up the message of today’s gospel. In our reading this morning, Jesus is continuing his missionary journey around the sea of Galilee, about 70 miles north of Jerusalem. He is teaching in the synagogues, preaching out in the open spaces, and sharing his gifts of healing with the lost, the lonely, the loser, the lame, and the left-behind. In all of these instances, he is filled with compassion, suffering alongside with those who weep.

Jesus is making a circuit of all the towns and villages around the sea of Galilee, spreading the good news of the kingdom of God. His message of love, service, sacrifice, and care for those on the margins is compelling to a people who often feel impotent and hopeless. Jesus backs up this message of love with concrete actions by sharing his gifts of healing with people who are diseased, bruised, and living broken lives. And yet as he looks out at the huge crowds, his heart continues to break. There are so many people out there, confused and aimless, wandering around like sheep without a shepherd.

Knowing that the task is too great for him alone, he hangs out a “help wanted” sign. He tells his disciples: “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few” so get on your knees and pray for more people to join us in the healing of this planet. Fortunately, his closest disciples apply for the job even though their skill set is limited. It seems that the basic requirements to work for the kingdom of God (which is just a churchy term for making this world a better place) is to have compassion, a willingness to serve others, and a commitment to a simple lifestyle. With 12 dedicated helpers in hand, Jesus then commissions his disciples to go out to the lost people of Israel, bringing health to the sick, raising the dead, and touching the untouchables. They are also to identify and get rid of those evil spirits which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

“The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” {Mt. 9:37} These 12 disciples seem to be the most unlikely folks for the job. Many of them are simple fisherman, some of whom are emotionally volatile. One is a zealot and another is a despised tax collector. One will ultimately betray him while still another will deny him. I often wonder how this rag tag bunch of disciples were finally able to get their acts together and be effective with the ministry of healing. But then I thought about what healing actually means. You don’t need a medical degree to heal. The word “to heal” (*therapeuo*) comes from the root word *to serve, to care for, to wait upon*. Anyone, no matter what their skill set or position in life is, can surely serve and care for others. When we serve and care for a person in need, that simple action can become very therapeutic and healing. In fact, being a servant to others in their distress is often sufficient enough to get them over the hump. In summary, it was the disciple’s compassion that strengthened their ability to be of service to the sick, the suffering, and the despairing.

“The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” If you are paying attention to the events that are happening in the world today, you too will admit that there are too few laborers who are committed to relieving suffering in the world. Help is wanted in every arena of our society. Many of the evil spirits that afflicted the Jews of the 1st century have taken up residence in our politics, our economics, and our priorities. Who among you will raise your voice to point out these destructive spirits and who will have the courage to drive them away? “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.”

I think about the recent disaster in London, one of the worst building fires in recent times. A government-owned housing project containing 120 apartments was gutted by flames. 58 people are either dead or unaccounted for while many others are injured. While disasters can happen to anyone, there had been complaints earlier by the residents of this complex regarding a lack of safety procedures and potential fire hazards. The wiring in the building was faulty, causing problems during power surges. Many of the fire extinguishers had expired or were labeled “condemned.” And while a fire extinguisher probably could not have saved the building, why had the voices of this low-income community gone unheard? There are now 109 families who are homeless, grieving their losses and needing to rebuild their lives. “The harvest is indeed plentiful but the laborers are too few.”

This month is men's mental health awareness month. The reason why the emphasis is particularly focused on men's health is because they are far less likely to seek help than their female counterparts. There has been an explosion of mental health problems in the 21st century. Every year, about 42 million American adults (almost 20% of the total adult population in the United States) suffer from some form of mental illness; enduring conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder or schizophrenia. And yet here in Amador County there are no psychiatric beds available for emergencies nor does the hospital have a resident psychiatrist. The best that can be done at this point in time is to triage suicide victims or people experiencing psychiatric breakdowns to someplace outside the county. "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few."

In addition to the mental health problems that plague our citizens, there are over 20 million Americans who have an addiction problem. 100 people die every day from drug overdoses, a rate that has tripled in the past 20 years. Above and beyond mental illness and addiction are a majority of people who are lost, dissatisfied, or basically unhappy. What are we to do? How are we to respond? And is there any good news in today's gospel that might point us in the right direction?

"About twenty years ago, some psychologists began to wonder what benefits might come from not just studying what makes people ill, but what makes them well. Thus, began the field of positive psychology. The initial focus for this new field was on what makes people happy. If, the thinking went, traditional psychology focused on what makes people sad or anxious, researchers of positive psychology would focus their studies on what makes people happy. The scientific research is now showing that pursuing happiness, in of itself, does not always make people happy.

"Philosopher, John Stuart Mill, wrote in his autobiography in the mid-nineteenth century: "Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way." It turns out that the research is now showing that the key to people experiencing a sense of well-being is not to focus on a life of happiness, but rather on a life of meaning." {Scott Stoner-Living Compass}

"The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." Two thousand years ago, Jesus posted a *Help Wanted* sign, looking for committed disciples who would move beyond their own needs to serve others. This invitation remains open. Jesus taught what all the great spiritual traditions have taught for centuries which is that a life grounded in meaning and service is not just good for the soul, but also good for one's happiness and well-being. And the surest way to find meaning in our lives is by reconnecting with those in need and generously sharing our gifts in the service of healing. Perhaps the 12 disciples knew this when they left their fishing nets to become servants to the lost people of Israel.

So the next time you find yourself wanting a little more happiness in your life, you would be wise to remember that bigger, better, faster, or more will not lead you there. The surest way to happiness is by reconnecting in a deeper way to that which truly gives you meaning and purpose in life. This, I believe, is the good news of today's gospel.