

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday After Trinity, June 14, 2015

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 488, 283, 496, 506, 492.

Lessons: Exodus 19:1-8, Romans 10:4-20, John 4:34-38.

Sermon Text: Matthew 9:35-38

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The first verse of our sermon text gives us the setting: *“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.”* In this chapter Matthew has recorded a number of miracles as well as Jesus preaching. We also read of Jesus calling him, Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him.

In the next chapter Jesus gives detailed instructions to his twelve disciples – the ones called “apostles” – before he sends them out. They are first of all to preach the message of the kingdom of heaven. *“These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.’”* (Matthew 10:5-8 NIV) At this time, their mission was first to the Jews and only to the Jews. He certainly prepared them, as we read a few verses earlier: *“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”* (Matthew 10:1 NIV)

But even before he sent them out to preach, to reach out to the lost sheep of Israel, Jesus instructs them to

PRAY FOR WORKERS FOR GOD’S KINGDOM

1. **Jesus himself was preaching, teaching and healing.**
2. **He had compassion on the people because they were “like sheep without a shepherd.”**
3. **Because there is still much – many souls – to harvest, Jesus’ disciples must pray for the Lord to send workers into his harvest field.**

When I (Pastor Mehlretter) was attending college and seminary, the entire student body, many of whom weren’t specifically preparing for the preaching or teaching ministries, gathered in the middle of the morning for “chapel”, a brief worship service. One of the most memorable devotions had the speaker walking up to the pulpit reading a newspaper. He started by telling us he was looking at the help wanted ads. Then he proceeded to present what could be an advertisement for workers for the Lord’s kingdom. It really included many more tasks than just preaching from the pulpit and teaching in a Christian school. Not many details are remembered from that sermonette, but this idea is surely essential: *“The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.”* (Matthew 9:37-38 KJV)

Jesus continued to travel from town to town, preaching, teaching, and healing, and the crowds continued to follow him. As Jesus surveyed the crowd, he had compassion on the people. He saw them as shepherdless sheep who were on their way to hell, and he was determined to rescue as many of them as possible. He also saw them as a field of grain ready for the harvest. After grain has reached that point, it must be harvested, otherwise it will fall to the ground and go to waste.

Jesus knew about shepherding. He said *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”* (John 10:14 NIV) Jesus came to be the shepherd, the good shepherd, the one who could show people how to avoid life’s pitfalls. He was overwhelmed with compassion. His words tell us about the mercy of God. Mark

reports that once *“When Jesus landed [from a boat] and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.”* (Mark 6:34 NIV)

Moses, before he died, prayed: *“May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.”* (Numbers 27:16-17 NIV)

At a time when things were not going well for God's people the prophet of the Lord said *“I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd.”* (1 Kings 22:17 NIV)

Aren't many people today like sheep without a shepherd? How many people do you know who are wandering spiritually? They might think they know what they want, but they often aren't sure.

Don't you believe and hold dear the truth of God's Word that they need?

Many who are simply “going to church” may not be receiving all the benefit possible from the Word of God. Remember the power of the Word of God. *“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”* (Hebrews 4:12-13 NIV) In our Epistle lesson today you heard that *“faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* (Romans 10:17)

Most of the people in Jesus' time were in the gravest spiritual distress. But this should serve to arouse Jesus' disciples to action. The harvest of God is always great, since he wants all men to be saved. When the souls of men have grown weary and are filled with the husks of human doctrines and traditions of men, they are more apt to feel and realize their need of the Gospel of Jesus, as in the case of many of the Jewish nation. Unfortunately, the laborers who know and believe the Gospel-teachings, who are willing to work for Christ, are few.

What was needed then and is needed now is God-serving shepherds. What is needed is some of Christ's compassion. What is needed is some of that willingness to work and, if need be, to suffer, which characterized the ministry of Christ. And most importantly what is needed are earnest, heart-felt prayers to the Lord of the harvest, to the great Lord of the Kingdom, that he himself would lead people to serve him and make the hearts of the laborers willing as he sends them forth to reap the souls for his eternal kingdom.

What should a shepherd be doing? The role of a shepherd is to lead and protect. Psalm 23 reminds us of his rod and staff to beat off enemies of the sheep and bring the sheep back when they stray. A shepherd is to lead, guide, protect, feed, water, find safe pasture, and lead home. God's shepherds are to lead his sheep to their heavenly home.

Two pictures were given here by Jesus: A flock of sheep neglected in the desert, and a harvest going to waste for lack of reapers. The people whom Jesus met were afflicted, beaten down, exhausted by long, aimless driving, completely worn out and scattered about. They had no faithful shepherds. The Pharisees and scribes gave them thousands of rules regulating the tiniest details of their lives, but neither taught them where to get the strength nor gave them the comfort of the Gospel.

Jesus had compassion on them.

Today it seems as though many church leaders give what they call “gospel” but it gives no spiritual, no lasting Biblical comfort. Many teach that we are to accept those who continue in sinning without admonishing them. They teach that we are to tolerate and accept sin without saying it is wrong.

Jesus was the perfect shepherd. Those servants of Christ whom Paul in the New Testament calls *“earthen vessels”* or *“jars of clay”* (2 Corinthians 4:7) have their shortcomings. They, too, are sinners. Every true Christian pastor has been concerned about his shortcomings and not doing everything he possibly could. But we rely on Christ to accomplish what he wants to accomplish.

But many people, it seems, don't want a shepherd. They'd rather do it alone. And the horrible thing about living alone, that is, without the Word of God, is death. Eternal death. Eternal damnation.

Because so many are without a God-fearing shepherd, Jesus tells us to *“Ask [“Pray”, the King James Version says] the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”*

Jesus started with an exhortation to pray. Prayer comes first, then the important responsibilities he will give to his servants. Pray, he says, so that people will respond to this need for workers.

Often when we pray for something, God answers by using us. Be prepared for God to use you to show another person the way to him. In our congregations especially right now everyone can help in some way. The Word of God tells us in First Corinthians: ***“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”*** (1 Corinthians 12:1-7 NIV)

Jesus asked his disciples, and he also asks us, to share in his compassion, and he tells us the first thing he wants us to do is to show such compassion: ***“Ask the Lord of the harvest ... to send out workers into his harvest field.”*** It is the Lord's harvest field, and he will see to it that the necessary workers bring the harvest in. He assures us that none of his elect will perish. All his sheep will be gathered into his fold. He will accomplish that either with us or without us. He doesn't need us, but he wants to use us. He graciously wants to give us the privilege of being involved in this all-important work, work with blessed results that will last into eternity. And the first thing he asks us to do is exceedingly simple and will cost us nothing but some of our time. He tells us to pray for workers for his harvest field. In response to our prayers, he will provide the workers.

As we sincerely offer such prayers to our heavenly Father, we surely are willing to let him make us the answers to our own prayers. Our Lord will use us in some way or other in this most blessed work, for this work is the privilege of all believers in Christ. It is a great privilege to pray for this work, to support this work, and to be involved in doing this work personally. Satan wants us to regard it as a grievous burden that we should avoid. But Jesus tells us ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*** Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

The Lord gives gifts. We only prepare ourselves. Paul writes in Ephesians ***“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”*** (Ephesians 4:11-13 NIV) The Holy Spirit provides the members of the body of Christ with spiritual gifts for varied service. The Lord knows the needs of his people on earth and he provides men to serve those needs.

Christian service has no unemployment. God has work enough for everyone. Jesus encouraged the disciples not just to do the work but also to pray for workers. Sometimes we can be so short-sighted. We think only of our own needs, our immediate needs in our two congregations here in Southern Minnesota. Who really knows what the Lord has in mind for us and for the message we hold so dear?

Whatever your role in God's work, pray today for more helpers. Believers are not always to work alone. They are to pray, recruit, and equip others to join them. ***“Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.”*** Amen.