

SERMON DELIVERED AT THE SUNDAY COMMUNION SERVICE

by

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Text: Matthew 9:36-38

In Christ Jesus, the Lord of the Harvest, dear members and friends of the Concordia Lutheran Conference:

Most all of you are familiar with the sermon-text we just read. Those of us who are older will recall that we often heard these words of the Bible proclaimed when we attended a so-called “mission festival.” This was a special gathering of the congregation, usually in the fall, where a guest preacher would speak about the need for more mission work and for more pastors. This was usually done in a special afternoon service, and it was often followed by delicious food. Today “mission festivals” are mostly a thing of the past.

However, in a special sense this morning’s service is a “mission festival,” for the need for pastors is as great or greater than it ever has been, especially in our Concordia Lutheran Conference.

Therefore, on the basis of the words of our God in Matthew 9:36-38, let us consider this morning

The Dire Prospect of Sheep Having No Shepherds

emphasizing these four parts, namely, that **I.** The need for faithful pastors is obvious with the potential harvest so plenteous; **II.** The supply of qualified laborers is short, particularly among us in these latter days; **III.** The training of pastors is *our* responsibility to the glory of God’s grace, and **IV.** The sending of them is *the Lord’s* office (business) for the welfare of His church.

I.

First let us consider the need with the potential harvest so plenteous. “*Jesus went through all the towns and villages,*” the Bible tells us in Matthew nine verse thirty-five. And as He traveled up and down Judea and Galilee, He saw throngs of people everywhere. And beyond the boundaries of His native land lay the surging pagan world. “*He saw [these] multitudes [or crowds],*” for even though He traveled in a comparatively small area of the world, in His divine omniscience He knew exactly what conditions were in other parts of the world. He knew that teeming millions of souls were walking in darkness, ignorant of the way to salvation, and that they had no one to bring them the everlasting Gospel.

And as He viewed these multitudes of people, the countless ears of grain in the harvest-field came to His mind. Therefore, He called His disciples to Him to inform them that “*the harvest, truly, is plenteous*” or plentiful.

The situation is no different today. There are millions that are marching to the valley of death without their Savior. Think of the crowds of people that we see at times. At sporting events, at music concerts, at political rallies, even in one shopping center on a Friday night there are masses of unconverted souls. While the claim is often heard that *ours* is a “Christian country” and that the majority of our citizens are “church-going” folks, the facts show otherwise. Besides, attendance “at church” — whatever the church — says nothing about what they are hearing, what they believe, whether they are even *professing* believers! Many (if not most) do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and their Savior from sin; and their lack of concern for religion in general does not really surprise us. In any case, most fulfill the prophecy of St. Paul in that they will not tolerate sound doctrine (II Timothy 2:4) — if any doctrine at all.

Then think of the waving fields white for the harvest in *other* nations. There is hardly a country in the world that has not heard the Gospel. Especially in the last one hundred years

has mission activity increased. Yet in some nations the true Gospel of the Bible has scarcely made a dent in the population. The vast majority of people still cling to their idols of wood and stone, or to the gods of materialism and self-service. In our Conference we would think especially of two nations – Russia and Nigeria – where we have from the pastors we support firsthand information about the godlessness there. In Nigeria we see and hear of rampant lawlessness that threatens our brethren and endangers their safety, were it not for God’s gracious protecting hand over them. In Russia it is corruption in both church and state inherited from 70 years of Marxist atheistic communism that hampers the free course of the Gospel – the one thing that the country really needs.

It is upon the multitudes of people that the Savior looked in His day, and upon which He still looks today, with the thought, “*The harvest, truly, is plenteous.*” And what rejoicing there would be in heaven among the angels, and on earth among Christian reapers, if this harvest could be safely gathered into the barn. The farmer breathes a sigh of relief and rejoices when the harvest is safely in for another year. How much more does God rejoice over one sinner who repents! St. Luke says in chapter fifteen, verse ten, “*Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth,*” and we know from Scripture that it is God’s earnest desire that all men be saved and come unto the knowledge of His saving truth (I Timothy 2:4).

II.

But, while the Savior made the announcement of the bountiful harvest, a truly positive situation for its potential, He also noted that “*the laborers are few!*” There was a worker shortage. Of course, Jesus was not speaking of the availability of laborers in general for the economic prosperity of that time. Nor was He referring to the labor force even in our own country working “*for the meat which perisheth*” (John 6:27). The Savior was lamenting the shortage of *church*-workers. And, in fact, when we think of the shortage of laborers in the Savior’s vineyard and harvest-field, particularly among us, it is sad to note that many Christians will labor for years to be able to sing, to play a musical instrument, to play sports, to paint pictures, and to be able to speak in public, especially when it enhances their earthly occupation. Yet, many do not regard laboring as a harvest-hand for Christ in His Church to be a desirable life’s work or occupation. Thus, there continues to be a labor shortage in the harvest-field, which Christ Himself urgent calls to our attention.

And, in times past, when only men and not machines were used in the harvest, it was a frightening situation not to have enough workers on hand when the crop was ripe for harvest. Today it might be the unavailability of machines, or parts to fix them, that would produce the frightening situation. And in our Conference at this time, the shortage of faithful pastors, both for the present and for the future, is not only of urgent concern to all of us, but the prospect of finding and training dedicated students to prepare for the Holy Ministry, sooner rather than later, is a challenge that we dare not ignore!

And what is the labor, the hard work, that counts in the kingdom of Christ? We can learn what this is from the Lord of the harvest, whose Holy Spirit prompted St. Paul to write down by divine inspiration the job description for a Christian harvest-hand: “*Preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine*” (II Timothy 4:2). That is the work, the labor, that Christ expects His workmen to study and prepare for and then to carry out in the fields.

Thus the first and most important work is preaching and teaching the Gospel. And, while personal Christian mission work is properly the task and should be the privilege of every believer, as by word and example he bears witness to the love of Christ for sinful men, the task of public preaching and teaching in the local congregation is, according to Christ’s own institution, vested in the pastoral office — the office with very specific qualifications and specified responsibilities.

But how many such workers are there in the harvest-field today? And how many are truly faithful in their preaching, teaching, and practice according to the Word of God? There are

many *wolves* (false prophets) *in sheep's clothing* (Matthew 7:15) who howl that the work is not getting done, when in reality they are not feeding their sheep at all. They are devouring them (Ezekiel 34:2). There are others that say, "*Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy Name??*" (Matthew 7:22), and the Lord of the harvest will say to them, "*I never knew you! Depart from Me, ye that work iniquity!*" (v. 23). The Lord is not satisfied with "belly-servers" as workers in His harvest, nor with ravening wolves who devour the "crop" of sheep and lambs before they can be gathered in! He wants us to prepare faithful, dedicated, and diligent workers, who themselves are the sheep of His pasture, to undertake this important work. And that preparation, as we now see in the next part of our sermon, is *our* responsibility.

III.

The situation today is equally as alarming as it was in when our Savior walked visibly among men. Something must be done about the shortage of qualified workers, especially in our Conference. May the words of our Savior here in our text move us to realize this and stir us to prompt action for His Name's sake and for the sake of His anticipated harvest.

"But what are we to do?" First and foremost there is a need for more earnest and steadfast prayer in our daily devotions. Our Lord says in our text, "*Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth laborers into His harvest.*" And although many of us have prayed, and are still praying, that a son or another young Christian brother known to us would prepare for work in the Lord's harvest, yet it sometimes seems that our prayers have not been answered, or that they have been answered with a "no." In such a moment of weakness, we dare not ascribe the shortage of workers to the Lord Jesus, as if He does not care about our plight, just because we do not immediately observe His helping hand. We know better than that when He teaches us to pray *unconditionally* for spiritual gifts that are according to His revealed will to grant us. But we are not to be filled with worry. The Holy Ghost through the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 4:6, "*Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.*" For Jesus promises: "*If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you*" (John 15:7).

But we must also pray with "*confidence*," James tells us, "*nothing wavering*" (James 1:6); and our confidence is made evident by our willingness, under God and with His blessing, to do our own part faithfully according to His directives and then to rely upon Him to bring it to pass (Psalm 37:5). At this time, when our Conference has a dire need for pastors, a call to *action* is also in order. In the past there have been willing and able instructors to teach men who have answered God's call for workers. And the Conference has in recent years been able to compensate as "*worthy of his hire*" (Luke 10:7) its one active instructor for his extra service to the Conference and to the Lord's Church. Also, under our peripatetic system of the last decade, a full-time student received some subsistence support for living expenses. But to what extent will the Conference be willing to go today to fulfill its responsibility of training future pastors? Will it not only supply them with competent instructors and a well-designed curriculum, but will it assume the present challenge of supporting them financially while they study? Will our people generally recognize these needs and stand able and willing to sacrifice as necessary to meet them — all according to the ability which God's abundant grace affords them (II Corinthians 9:8)? That question has been answered to a certain extent by the resolution of this convention; and the dire prospect of sheep having no shepherds surely influenced that decision. Many in the Conference ask the question: "What will happen in Conference churches if there are no trained men to take the place of older pastors who may no longer be able to do the work due to ill health or even death?" And younger pastors are not immune to these occurrences either. We know that all situations are in the hands of God (Psalm 31:15), and He knows best what is good for our Conference churches. He assures us in Romans 8:28 that "*all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.*" The love of Christ constrains us to do according to His will (II Corinthians 5:14), and our love for Him who first loved us compels us as true believers and as members of the Concordia Lutheran Conference to do all in our power to train pastors, including the giving of monetary gifts to the Lord for that very purpose and

encouraging young and even older men to train for the ministry in our seminary where they are prepared to undertake the pastoral office at the call of the Holy Ghost (Acts 20:28).

There is an important word in our text that we have not yet considered – it is the word “*compassion.*” “*But when He [Christ] saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.*” When Christ saw those straying sheep, bruised, famished, and a sure prey of ever-present wolves, lacking a diligent and faithful shepherd’s leading, He was “*moved with compassion*” on them in their plight. They needed to hear His loving voice; they needed to have Him to follow instead of some hireling; they needed to be fed on the pastures of His Word; they needed to be guided with His comforting rod and staff in the paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake. They needed shepherds. And so do we; so do our children; and so do countless thousands of other fragile sheep just like ourselves. Would that our hearts were filled with compassion like unto that of our Savior for sheep without a shepherd! For that would surely move us to “*go forward*” like the Children of Israel at the Red Sea, even though obstacles seem to discourage us (Exodus 14:15).

IV.

It is the responsibility of the congregations of our Conference, in their joint efforts, to provide for the training of future pastors; but it is God who will send them out for the welfare of His Church. It is the Lord Himself who recruits laborers for His harvest and works in them the desire to serve as His ambassadors. And those who answer His call, “*Who will go for us?*” as did Isaiah, saying, “*Here am I; send me*” (Isaiah 6:8), will cheerfully dedicate themselves to the task of studying to show themselves approved unto Him, well-trained workmen that do not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth. But the call of the Holy Spirit into the incumbency of the Pastoral Office will have to await His own good time, when prepared candidates are made overseers over Christ’s local flocks and are charged with their feeding and oversight (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2ff.). That is God’s office, and we leave that to Him.

Many young men feel inadequate for this calling and are reticent to commit themselves to the task. They are not alone in this. Christ’s own disciples, the chosen Twelve, to whom the Lord made the remarks of our text, showed some hesitancy when Christ called them to serve; but once they took up the yoke for Him and realized that it was He that would make them able servants and stewards of His mysteries (I Corinthians 4:1), they never surrendered it but plowed the missionary fields of the world with all diligence as long as God gave them the power to do so. And it has been the same with many chosen thousands since that time. Once they submitted themselves to the Lord of the harvest, determined to follow His Word as faithful stewards, they never looked back, but continued to make full proof of their service to Him for the salvation of mankind.

But aside from the fact that “employment” under the Lord of the harvest offers spiritual “job satisfaction” and “security” under the shadow of the Lord’s protecting wings (Psalm 91), there is the added incentive that the world needs the conscientious labor of ministers that preach and teach the whole counsel of God. At this stage of the world’s history many may think that doctors, teachers, and scientists are what the world needs most. And people in these fields of labor certainly bring many temporal benefits to their fellowmen. But laborers for the Lord of the Harvest are God’s lowly instruments to bring to the world the greatest gifts and benefits, namely, the remission of sins and everlasting salvation! “*For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul*” (Matthew 16:26)? And what was the cost of these invaluable gifts? The cost was the blood of the Son of God, as the holy writer states in I Peter 1:18-19, “*Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from you fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as a Lamb without blemish and without spot.*”

The cost to us of preparing future pastors is not “small change,” to be sure; but when we who “*know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (II Corinthians 8:9) and what it cost Him to redeem us, consider the alternative, namely, “*a famine of hearing the words of the Lord*”

(Amos 8:11), what cost would **you** consider **too great**? What cost would be a “**deal-breaker**” for **you**? Would **you** put a “price-tag” on having a faithful Christian pastor in the future for yourself and your children? “*What shall a man give in exchange for his soul??*” Jesus asks us (Matthew 16:26). May the Lord of the harvest bring us to realize the dire condition of our harvest-field and the need to prepare reapers at virtually ANY price! Every soul of man needs the Gospel; but there is a worker shortage, especially in our Conference. Will you have compassion on souls groping about in the darkness of ignorance and despair? Will you pray that God will lead you to proper action in helping alleviate the shortage? And when He answers in and through the clear directives of His Word, will you take the action He suggests or even demands? Will you answer like Isaiah did in the Old Testament (Isaiah 6:8), when God asked him, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” Will you willingly answer, “*Here am I; send me*”? God grant you, by the power of His Gospel, the faith and determination to do so, “*for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure*” (Philippians 2:13). Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!