

The Workers Are Working

Matthew 9:35-38

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Boy, Jesus sure was a lucky guy. As he went throughout all the towns and villages, teaching and preaching, healing and spreading love, he looked out and saw a world crowded with needs. It won't surprise you to know Jesus had compassion for the crowds facing such a crushing load. They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." Boy, Jesus was a lucky guy. When he saw a field of harvest just spilling over with opportunities to minister and serve, to heal, to bring hope, to give actual help to those who were harassed and helpless, Jesus had a few workers to help him out. Try to bring in the harvest when there are no workers at all. Not just a few. None.

As of Sunday morning, March 15, 2020, there have been no workers at all at the Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. No ushers. No greeters. No worship assistants. No choir director and no choir and not even an accompanist. No one making coffee. No one bringing snacks for coffee fellowship. No one preaching. There have been no workers at our church since Sunday, March 15, 2020. The harvest is plentiful, oh, the harvest is always plentiful, but the workers are none. Not few. None. Zilch. Zippo. Nada. Not one! None.

Well, that is not exactly the truth. It is true that there has been no one here working on Sunday mornings since the beginning of March. But something strange and wonderful happened when no one was working here in the church. The Coronavirus tried to put everybody in one great big timeout. Go home! You cannot do anything until we flatten the curve. Do nothing. Stay home.

Well, first of all, not everyone was able to stay home. People who do jobs that are very important for the rest of us who unfortunately often forget how important those jobs are for the rest of us, well their jobs became essential. I am sure some just showed up because they had to or showed up to get their paycheck. But so many others, in fact I believe the overwhelming majority of others realized how important their essential job was, and they threw themselves into it, even though there was risk involved, the risk of being on the front lines. Medical workers, cleaning services and custodians, workers in grocery stores and markets, drivers of trucks, drivers of buses, drivers delivering mail or packages, plumbers, electricians, police and fire and emergency responders...they heard the call to a plentiful harvest and they were not about to let the answer be, "The workers are few."

And there was a whole other group of workers who were not few. All those folks who the virus said to go home and do nothing, well, they went home, but they didn't do nothing. They realized this was a critical time with a critical need for kindness, compassion, generosity, hospitality, listening, and loving. I'm sure some people who were told by the virus to stay home and do nothing obeyed the rules by binge watching their hours away. But so many others, in fact I believe the overwhelming majority of others realized how essential their non-essential contributions were.

A high school student saw the need for masks. Her grandmother gave her a sewing machine. She learned to sew masks. She has made over 500. The Coronavirus told this high school student to go home and do nothing and she answered back, "No, the harvest is plentiful and I have work to do."

The Warm Center had to stop serving their dinners in the way they had been serving. Too many hands involved in the preparation and distribution. But when the first Saturday of the month rolled around, the Warm Center did not say, "The harvest is plentiful but we cannot do anything...The Coronavirus told us to do nothing." No, the Warm Center said bring us supplies to make sandwiches and some snacks to go with it, and we will use that to help feed the hungry. So on the first Saturday of the month, when the Coronavirus told you to go home and do nothing, you answered back, "No, the harvest is plentiful and we have work to do." And you brought a bountiful supply of food. Then last month you brought individual frozen dinners.

The Coronavirus told you to go home and do nothing, that you couldn't gather with others. You had to isolate. Too risky to hug and be in the same room and sing and pray together. So what did you do? You found other ways to reach out. Yeah, most of us have learned how to text now, and I am sure a zillions texts have been sent back and forth. But some of you remembered your phone has another feature. You can talk into it. And you can hear when someone talks back. Because of that amazing feature, you were able to call and let people know you were thinking about them. You were able to tell them you were concerned. And you were able to use that listening feature on the phone and let others tell their story, let others tell you how they were doing. The Coronavirus said stay home and do not have contact with other people. You answered back, "No, the harvest is plentiful and we have work to do"

You learned that mail is a three-legged stool. You have e-mail, which is electronic mail. You have knee-mail, which is a creative way of describing prayer. And there is this old fashioned form of mail called snail mail, where you write on paper with a pen or pencil, fold up the paper, stuff it in an envelope, put a stamp and

an address, lick the envelope, and put it in the mailbox. Boy, for something as simple and old-fashioned as snail mail, the arrival of a hand-written note has been one of the biggest blessings many have received during this time of isolation. The Coronavirus said stay home and do not have contact with other people. You answered back, “No, the harvest is plentiful and we have work to do.”

A preacher named Juan Carlos Ortiz told a story. He said his church had grown to be a large congregation. However, the congregation was not filled with many workers. He was serving a church like Jesus might have been talking about. There was a plentiful harvest just waiting for this church to send out workers...but every time the call went out for workers, the workers were few. The church grew larger, but Juan Carlos Ortiz had a bad feeling that the church was not healthy. The church needed to get to work.

One Sunday Juan Carlos Ortiz stood up before his big congregation and he read verses from John 13 where Jesus says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” He put down his bible and he preached his sermon. This was his sermon. “Love one another.” When he finished his sermon, which was not a three-point sermon, it was just a three-word sermon, Juan Carlos sat down. His sermon was over. “Love one another.” Well, the people did not know what to do. They waited for him to stand up and say more. He waited for them to do something. He told them what Jesus told them, which was, “Love one another.” But no one did anything. After a long time, he got up and said something else. Actually, what he said was exactly what he had said before. He preached his sermon a second time. “Love one another.” He sat down again. People were uncomfortable. They did not know what to do. Finally, people started to leave shaking their heads at what a strange Sunday that had been.

By the next Sunday, all was forgotten. By the next Sunday, all was forgiven. The big crowd came again to listen to their pastor, Juan Carlos Ortiz. That next Sunday Juan Carlos stood up and he opened his bible to...John 13. He read the verses where Jesus tells his disciples to love one another. He put his bible away and he began his sermon. This was his sermon on that next Sunday. “Love one another.” Not three points. Just three words. And then he sat down again. No one did anything. It was uncomfortable. Again, after a long time, Juan Carlos stood and said, “Jesus told you to love one another. So have I. Love one another.” I don’t remember how long Juan Carlos Ortiz said he waited, but at some point, a person stood up and made their way over to another person. They whispered together. Tears formed in their eyes. They joined hands and prayed together. Guess what they were doing? Loving one another. Slowly but surely, people got up, they moved, they spoke words, they listened, they held hands and prayed, they hugged, they made plans of how they could help each other or help others who were in need.

Here is the part I love best about that story. That congregation eventually got up and left the church. But they did not leave the command to love one another in the church, sitting in the pews, locked up in the sanctuary. They took the command with them. They went into the world, and they took with them the love of God.

That crazy Coronavirus thought if he told us we could not come to church, that because we could not do anything at church, that crazy Coronavirus thought since we could not do anything at church we would do nothing at home. He thought we would do nothing at all. He was greatly mistaken. All the Coronavirus did was cause the church that belongs to Jesus Christ to go out into the harvest field to work and to witness in his holy name.

Let me be clear, the Coronavirus has taken an immense toll on individual lives, on the life of communities, on our economy and our healthcare system. The Coronavirus is a pandemic. Pandemic means the virus has spread worldwide. The whole world has been affected. What an amazing and God-given gift that the church was sent home during this time. Every household needs workers. Every family needs workers. Every neighborhood needs workers. Every town, every city, every state, every nation needs workers. The Coronavirus is a pandemic that has hit us worldwide. Now the tragic death of George Floyd and the wave of protests have brought the issue of racial justice before us yet again. The need for justice and equality is also a worldwide issue. People of God, the harvest is plentiful. The need is urgent. All around the world the harvest is plentiful. The full impact of the Coronavirus hit us suddenly. We had no time to prepare for this. The shut down caught us off-guard. We barely got the word out. “No church this Sunday.”

But if that crazy Coronavirus was thinking because there was no church there would be no workers, he found out he was greatly mistaken. Without a coordinated plan, in most cases without the prompting of anyone else, you have gone into the harvest and been workers for the kingdom of God. Without a coordinated plan, in most cases without the prompting of anyone else, you have taken the three-word-sermon of Jesus and put it into practice. “Love one another.” You have taken the three-word sermon of Jesus and brought it to life. Without a coordinated plan...without prompting...once again, that is not really true. There is a coordinated plan...because we worship the God who is guiding and leading and shaping the events of our world in ways far beyond our human ability to understand. And there have been promptings...the Holy Spirit, living within the people of God, the Holy Spirit has been busy prompting you with ways you can be a worker in the great harvest field. And Jesus has been prompting us. Jesus is always prompting us. “Love one another.”

Juan Carlos Ortiz stood before a packed house, a congregation bursting at the seams, and he said, “Love one another.” Then he waited for the people to pick up those words and take them into the world, because the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Here I am, preaching to an empty house. There is no one here to send out into the world. Today as I share the words of that life-giving sermon that was first preached by Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, you will hear these words not in a church. You will hear these words in your home, in your neighborhood, in your community, in the world...in God’s world...in God’s world that he loved so much he gave his one and only Son. You will hear these words smack dab in the middle of the harvest field. You are the worker. You are in the harvest field. Jesus is calling you and calling me...Jesus is calling us to be his workers, and you are right where you need to be. You are right where you are needed. Today the words of the little three-word sermon of Jesus are coming to you right where you are, right where you are in the middle of God’s harvest field. Take his words to heart. Take his words and put them into practice. Take his words into the harvest field and be his worker. Here is that profound and life-giving and life-changing message of Jesus, his sermon that is not three points, but simply three words. “Love one another.”