

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 18, 2023 (Lect 11, Proper 6, Year A
Matthew 9:35-10:23

Jesus COMMANDED us to pray to "the Lord OF the harvest to send out laborers INTO his harvest."

But the harvest may not be WHERE we THINK it is. The story is told of a farmer in ancient Persia named Ali Hafed. He had a large farm with gardens and grain fields, and was a wealthy man. But one day he had a visitor who told him all about diamonds, a wonderful stone that was found in far-away lands. They were the most precious commodity on earth, and a person who had them would be wealthy beyond belief.

Ali Hafed went to bed that night, but he couldn't sleep. The words of the visitor haunted him. He felt that he had to HAVE one of these diamonds. Soon, he SOLD his farm, and went out to FIND his diamonds.

Years passed. He was broken in body and spirit. His funds were gone. After MANY years, he died POOR and PENNILESS, having NEVER found what he sought.

Meanwhile, the man who BOUGHT his farm led his camel to the water to drink, and saw something glimmering in the water. This was only the FIRST of MANY shining stones in the river.

This, according to the legend, is how the famous diamond mine of Golconda was discovered, the most MAGNIFICENT diamond mine in the world, from which such jewels as the Hope Diamond and the Crown Jewels of England were taken.

Had Ali Hafed stayed home and looked AROUND him, he would have had ACRES of diamonds. He just never LOOKED in his OWN back yard.

Foreign missions will always be important to the church, but in TODAY'S world, in the UNITED STATES, the mission field has CHANGED. We can't neglect our OWN back yard. Today, Africa is actually sending missionaries HERE. The HARVEST is HERE.

My friends, I know that the Aitkin isn't growing like the Cities and suburbs, but I also know that there are ACRES of diamonds right here in our own back yard. There are people right here in OUR area that DON'T HAVE church families, just WAITING to be asked. All we have to do is pick up the diamonds that are AROUND us.

We have evidence of this. I've told you often about our Wednesday Coffeehouse and Wednesday Night Faith Class for the 5th and 6th graders. That class kept growing the entire year, because the kids kept asking their friends to come along.

I know of another Lutheran church that experienced the same thing. One year, of the 140 kids registered in their k-6th grade Wednesday night program, 64 of them were not members there. They didn't belong to ANY church, and NEVER HAD.

Those families are called the UNCHURCHED, and THAT is our mission field. And those kids that INVITED their friends are MISSIONARIES.

Jesus says that the harvest is plentiful. But the harvest will NEVER be brought in unless there are workers to reap it. Jesus needs PEOPLE to be his hands and feet, to carry his Word. He STILL wants people to hear his message, to hear the good news, but they'll NEVER hear it unless OTHER people tell them.

This is what we call "evangelism." Evangelism is what the church has ALWAYS been about. It's our PURPOSE for EXISTING. "Go, therefore, and make disciples." Evangelism isn't ON the AGENDA of the church; it IS the agenda of the church. IT'S WHAT WE DO.

JESUS NEEDS PEOPLE. Now, on ONE hand, there's a tremendous shortage of pastors right now. And it's only getting WORSE, because the number of pastors retiring each year far EXCEEDS the number coming OUT of seminary. We need to encourage our youth to CONSIDER MINISTRY as

a calling. First Lutheran has already sent a few of our young people into ministry, but there is MORE work to be done.

BUT, evangelism isn't JUST for PASTORS. It's the prayer of Christ that EVERY Christian should be a missionary and an evangelist. If the harvest of people is EVER going to be brought in, then EVERY one of us has to be a worker. We are ALL part of the priesthood of all believers, and EVERY ONE of us is called to SHARE our faith.

Now that said, not ONLY has the HARVEST changed, so has the way we DO evangelism. This is why so many of us FEAR SHARING our faith – we STILL think of it in terms of knocking on doors and talking to people we don't even KNOW. But notice what JESUS says about how to approach people. He says to go and STAY with them. To STAY with someone means to spend TIME with them, to eat what they eat, do what they do, DRESS like they dress. To CONNECT with them.

MOST of the time, sharing our faith has NOTHING to do with WORDS. It's not about going door to door; it's simply LIVING our faith.

That's how the church GREW so FAST those first few hundred years. They CARED about people. They TOOK care of the people that everyone ELSE looked down on or ignored. They gave their time and their possessions to others, something UNHEARD of in the Roman world. They took CHRIST'S EXAMPLE, and STARTED with COMPASSION. These Christians were DIFFERENT. They had something people WANTED. People NOTICED.

Evangelism and missions have to be relational, something that happens in our RELATIONSHIP with other people. If we're going to REACH people, we need to SHOW them that we really CARE.

You know, there's no record of Jesus ever walking up to someone out the blue and saying: "I'm the Messiah" and THEN showing his care for them; he always HELPED FIRST, CARED for people FIRST, and THEN he revealed himself to them.

There's a wonderful legend about Saint Francis, the kindly thirteenth century monk. One day, he informed his brethren that he planned to go into the nearby village on a preaching mission. He invited a novice to go along. On their way, they passed an injured man, and Francis promptly stopped, saw to the poor fellow's needs and arranged medical care for him.

They went on, and soon passed a homeless man who was near starvation. Again, Francis stopped his journey and ministered to the hungry, homeless man.

So it went, throughout the day: people in need, Francis lovingly caring for them as best he could, until the sun was low in the sky. Then he told his novice friend it was time for them to return to the monastery for evening prayers. But the young man said, "Father, you said we were coming to town to preach to the people." Francis smiled. Then he said, "My friend, that's what we've been doing all day."

That's evangelism at its most faithful. Ministering to people in need. Not worrying about numbers, or converting people, or winning popularity. Evangelism is sharing the love of God in concrete ways to God's people.

Friends, don't worry about what you'll say. Like the saying goes, "Proclaim the Gospel at all times; if NECESSARY, use words."

Evangelism isn't a concept. It isn't about fancy words. Evangelism is FIRST AND FOREMOST about what you DO, the way you LIVE. The WORDS will come later.

Go and be apostles. SHOW someone that you really care. Invite them to church. God will do the rest. Amen.