

Sermon Preached on
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
(July 3, 2016)
"What Is The Harvest?"

Our Gospel today is so famous, everyone knows the line, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." And it's fairly clear the passage was written at least in part to encourage Jesus' followers to get out there into the world and, well, harvest.

But harvest what?

This past week or so I've seen people standing in front of the post office - always in pairs just like the gospel says - proclaiming their message. But what message? And to what end? What exactly are they planting, and what will they harvest? Because, as Paul says, "you reap whatever you sow."

This always becomes a little trickier once you look at it.

So let's look at the situation in today's gospel once more. Jesus and his disciples are probably still well north of Jerusalem in the land of the Samaritans who believed in God, but did not use all the same scriptures and did not believe the temple was the center of worship. Remember last week when he sent disciples ahead, and they weren't received?

Now he sends out 70 to do the same thing - prepare for his arrival. It doesn't say exactly what villages, but we have to assume it's both in Samaria and Judea. And what precisely does he tell them to do? What's their message? Cure the sick and say to them, "The Kingdom of God has come near." That's the same message he gives to the villages the DON'T receive them - except for the curing part, of course.

So, is this what Jesus is asking of us - that we cure the sick and simply let people know the Kingdom is near? That's not what those people at the post office were doing. They were warning passers-by that if they don't accept Christ, they will go to hell.

But perhaps a better question is, what are WE doing? And to what end? What are you and I doing to obey this command of Jesus?

Are we telling people that God will destroy them if they don't convert?

I'm not just talking about those folks in front of the post office. This has been the practice of Christians to force others into conversion, often under threat of death. Even in the last century in America, many churches including ours had the practice of removing Native American

children from their homes and literally beating out of them their culture and religion so they could be "saved." I wonder, would that harvest really be what God seeks? Or would it be a terrified - or angry - group of people following under duress?

That's not US, of course. We're friendly and welcoming. But, are we asking people to come be part of the church so they can improve our numbers, fill out pews, and join our committees? Would that be the harvest God seeks, or would it lead to a group who are burnt out and resentful?

There's no doubt that there are many people in this world - in this country - whose lives will improve enormously if they truly encounter the risen Christ. Whose lives can be made whole again. Whose souls can be put back on a path toward the kingdom of God. There are roughly 350 million people in this country. 25% of them declare themselves either atheist or agnostic. 75% profess some level of belief, though not necessarily affiliation to a particular religion. 100% of them are children of God, and 100% are ripe to hear or experience God's love in action.

But if we assume today's Gospel is telling us to not merely put up a sign that says "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You," what are we to proclaim, and how? We cannot pretend there is one simple answer to this.

Certainly Christ expects us - if we are truly his followers - to get out of this building and proclaim. Not, I would suggest, by standing in front of the post office and holding pictures of eternal flame. But certainly to the people God puts in our path and with whatever means we have available to us. Yesterday, a group of us took part in one of the Worship Walks across the street. We were pretty low key, but when we celebrated the Eucharist in the Italian Garden, people noticed - I could see them sneaking a peek as they walked by as we celebrated God's call for us to be stewards of creation.

Or lately, I've taken to spending an hour or so a week at Cranberry's with this sign that reads FREE PRAYER. I've done it three times so far, and each time, someone has come up, and said, "Are you serious about that prayer? Can we talk?" It's unobtrusive, yet inviting, and those who need it come. I hope that this is one form of curing and proclaiming that the kingdom is in fact near.

This method won't work for everyone. But if you seek a way to bring healing and proclaim the Kingdom, you will find what works for you.

So the short answer to "what is the harvest?" is this: every person on earth is ripe to experience God's love. At work, at political rallies, at ball games, at 4th of July parades, in prison, in refugee camps. The parable immediately following this passage is of the Good Samaritan. In it, a guy reaches across political, religious, and cultural divisions to care for someone in need. Not a word about God, but showing God's love.

So perhaps Jesus does not suggest beating people over the head with the bible. But neither does he suggest we simply go out there and be nice people - the Good Samaritan knew how radical his helping the injured man was.

The harvest is plentiful - and the harvest is us - all of us. The 25% who believe nothing or don't know what they believe, and the 75% who profess to believe (though for many, it may be just words). And if we treat every single person as one who needs to experience God's love in word and deed, we will always harvest a world that is just a little better. Amen.