

### **Theme: “Workers for the Harvest”**

**Text: “When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.’” (Matthew 9:36-38)**

Showing emotion is a very natural thing for us to do. We react to things we see and hear. Our emotions can range from sorrow to joy, from anger to love, from resentment to gratitude, from depression to elation. We experience a myriad of wide-ranging emotions on a daily basis.

Jesus also experienced emotion on many occasions during His earthly ministry. For example, He experienced righteous anger at those who were buying and selling in the temple and drove them out with a whip made of cords. He expressed sorrow and grief at the tomb of Lazarus, and, in the shortest verse in the Bible, John records how “Jesus wept.” He expressed anxiety in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday as He engaged in prayer with the Father, so that, as Luke records, His sweat fell to the ground as drops of blood. These and many other examples demonstrate that Jesus showed emotion repeatedly during His earthly ministry.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus expresses an emotion as He looks out over the crowds of people. Matthew says that “Jesus had compassion on them.” This word compassion is much more than a shallow feeling of regret or sorrow. Instead, it denotes a deep anguish, a gut-wrenching type of anxiety and sorrow over the condition of people. What was the spiritual condition of the people that Jesus observed? Matthew records “they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

This observation was a spiritual observation. It was a description of the spiritual lives of those who were living outside of the salvation so freely offered by our God. But what does this description mean? Think for a moment about actual sheep who are without a shepherd. A shepherd would lead his sheep and make certain that they were where they could find an ample supply of food and water. Sheep without a shepherd have no direction, no destination; they can even starve to death or die of dehydration without a shepherd to lead them. A shepherd protects his sheep from predators and anything else that would be harmful to them. Sheep without a shepherd tend to wander off on their own and, being helpless and defenseless, are easy targets for predators. Sheep without a shepherd are in great danger.

It is one thing to be talking about sheep. It is quite another to be talking about people. Jesus felt gut-wrenching anguish over the souls of these people who were facing spiritual starvation without someone to feed them and lead them to true spiritual nourishment. They were in danger without a shepherd to protect them from false teaching and spiritual poison. Like sheep without the good shepherd, they were alone and vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one, who roams around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Jesus had compassion on them.

Have things changed at all? From a spiritual standpoint, would the expression “like sheep without a shepherd” be an apt description of many people in 21st-century America? Absolutely! Directionless, helpless, vulnerable to the attacks of Satan, many people today are in the very same condition as the people observed by Jesus in our text.

A recent study of 3,000 American youth resulted in the following summary of their belief system regarding God:

1. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth."
2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."
3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about ones self."
4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."
5. "Good people go to heaven when they die."

(*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Eyes of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton).

"Like sheep without a shepherd" is an accurate description of the spiritual lives of many 21st-century Americans.

Perhaps there have been times when even we have acted as though we would rather not have a shepherd in our lives, spiritually speaking. To the extent that we have conformed to the world's view of God and our relationship to Him, we can only ask for forgiveness. To the extent that we have failed to speak the truth in love when others around us have expressed views of God and eternal life that are in direct opposition to the Word of God, we can only seek God's forgiveness. For the times when we have failed to show the compassion of Christ toward those who are lost and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, we can only ask our gracious God to show compassion to us.

The dramatic truth is that sheep without a shepherd are more than just a little lost. They are more than just a little vulnerable. They are facing certain danger and destruction.

Fortunately for all of us, Jesus did a lot more than feel compassion for those in our text and for all people. This emotion moved Him to an act that went far beyond what any shepherd would be expected to do for His sheep: He laid down His life for us as His sheep. As the Good Shepherd, He sacrificed His own life in order to defeat the predators of sin, death and the devil who held us, the wandering sheep, in their jaws. Thanks to this perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world and thanks to God's working in our lives, we have a Good Shepherd who will lead us down the path of life for eternity.

But, as He told His disciples, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

If these other sheep are to be brought into the "sheep pen" of the Savior, there is a problem that must be recognized. It is a problem of magnitude. To describe this problem, Jesus switches from the imagery of sheep and a shepherd to the imagery of a harvest and laborers. As Christ observed, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field." In short, there are so many people, so many souls at stake, and the laborers, those to proclaim the Word of God, are so relatively few.

Today, indeed, the harvest is plentiful. Our own LCMS Board for Mission Services reported the following to the 2004 LCMS Convention:

- Nearly four billion people—or two out of every three—do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.
- The world Christian population stands at 32 percent, Muslim at 21 percent and non-religious at 15 percent.
- It is estimated that 1.2 billion or 60 percent of "Christians" are nominal or non-practicing; millions more trust in their own good works rather than in God's grace through Jesus for salvation.

The harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few when compared with the enormity of the task at hand. Today, we are observing Concordia Seminary Sunday and the importance of the pastoral ministry in the life of the church. Perhaps you read in the May issue of *The Lutheran Witness* that, “if the seminaries continue to graduate only as many men as they did last year, the supply of active ministers in 20 years will be half of what it is today. Each year, nearly 200 pastors are added to the clergy roster of the LCMS, but 300 or more leave the roster due to retirement, death, or other reasons. The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few.

What can be done? Exactly what Christ asks in today’s text, pray that the Lord of the harvest would continue to raise up workers for His harvest field. Remember, it is not our harvest field, it is the Lord’s harvest field. How encouraging that, in the Gospel lesson for today, Christ demonstrates the authority that He has over the harvest field in sending out the 12 and giving them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. It is His harvest field, and He has authority over it.

Second, thank this same Lord of the harvest for the way He answers the prayers of His people to raise up workers for His harvest field. God is responding in a wonderful way to these prayers. Concordia Seminary’s full-time residential enrollment of those who are preparing to serve as pastors now stands at 576 students, up 32 percent in the past five years. God is answering the prayers of His people, and we can give thanks to the Lord of the harvest for His gifts to us—men who have the desire to serve Him in this special way.

Finally, encourage those who might be considering such service, whether it is as a pastor, a teacher, a director of Christian education or any other church-related vocation. A word of encouragement and affirmation of the gifts God has given to others in the body of Christ can have a very positive effect on their willingness to consider serving in a full-time church vocation. Many who are serving as pastors today can point to particular people in their lives who encouraged them to consider the pastoral ministry. It might be parents, a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, a sponsor or another relative or friend. Encourage those who are or should be considering the pastoral ministry or other church work vocations to do so.

Dear friends in Christ, pray for workers to go out and work in our Lord’s harvest field. Give thanks as God answers the prayers of His people and raises up workers. Encourage those who are expressing a desire to do so. For as our Lord has observed, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” Amen.

Adapted from a sermon written by Rev. Glen D. Thomas

More Church Worker Recruitment Sunday Resources

Four sample sermons along with many other resources are available online at:  
<http://whataway.lcms.org/pages/whataway.asp?NavID=84>

Suggested hymns and collects can be found at: <http://www.lcms.org/pages/default.asp?NavID=11630>