

## *Laborers in the Harvest*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON LUKE 10:1-11

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*“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Luke 10:2)*

**M**IGHT JESUS HAVE FELT EVEN A LITTLE HOPELESS as he considered the scope of the work that lay ahead of him and the limits of the people and resources he had to work with? The potential of his proclamation, the opportunities in what he saw spread out before him, his hope for heaven on earth, were great beyond imagining. The number of people who caught his vision and who committed themselves to living it out and sharing it with others seemed small by comparison.

Yet whether he felt hopeful or hopeless in that moment, he trusted the certainty of God’s promise. He trusted that what God had begun, God would finish. He trusted God to provide – even in that daunting moment, and to the extent appropriate for that moment – just what was necessary for God’s purpose. And he abandoned himself to God’s will and to God’s provision for the fulfillment of that will.

Today I begin my second year as your pastor with a clear sense of two realities. One of those realities is the great need in this congregation and in the community around us. I’m not referring only to basic needs like food and clothing, shelter, security, and the like, although even those needs are greater in Williamsville than you might first guess. I’m talking about deeper needs we share with every other human being: the need for comfort and companionship; the need for respect from others and the opportunity to contribute to making a better life for ourselves and our neighbors; the need to be loved by others and to love in return.

In the face of those needs, I sometimes wonder if I’m up to the task of being your pastor, if I have what it takes to lead you to a condition in which your needs will be at least partly satisfied. In every need you express, I see an opportunity to harvest God’s blessings, and maybe I can imagine some of what Jesus felt when he said, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”

And that brings me to the second reality I sense today, that within the membership of this congregation, when we partner with God, are all the resources we need to realize

the vision our faith raises. Here in this community of faith, with God's providential presence, we have everything necessary to meet our deepest human needs, to realize our faith's greatest hopes, and to live creatively with life's most urgent questions. We don't need professional expertise or sophisticated programs from the denomination or the world of business. We need only to trust, discover, develop, and put to use the gifts God has given us. And I don't need to have all those gifts myself; I need only contribute the gifts I have to those you possess, so God can use them – and us – all together.

A century ago my great-grandfather, Seth Rapp, a farmer in the Missouri Bootheel, faced a challenge that confronted every other farmer in the area: how to bring in the annual harvest of wheat and other crops. It was a daunting task, but Seth and his neighbors had two gifts that helped them do what was needed. Seth had one of those gifts. He had the only threshing machine in the area – a huge, steam-powered, horse-drawn contraption. And the community had the other gift. They had each other – whole families, men providing labor for the fields, women loading the groaning boards with food, children helping at both tasks. Each year Seth Rapp hitched his team to that huge threshing machine, and the whole community joined forces and moved from farm to farm bringing in the harvest.

We don't all need to contribute big, splendid gifts for the reaping of God's harvest of abundant life. There was, after all, only one threshing machine near Benton, Missouri, a century ago. We need only bring the gifts we have, trusting that each of them, when added to those of everyone else, will together make enough for the harvest, if they are offered with love. Around the time Seth Rapp was taking his threshing machine from farm to farm, the great Carmelite saint, St. Thèrèse of the Child Jesus, told an ordinary lay sister, "Your life is one that is humble and hidden, but remember that nothing is small in the eyes of God. Do all that you do with love." And St. Teresa of Calcutta said none of us can do great things; we can only do small things with great love.

The gifts some of you offer are more visible: you serve on the Lay Leaders Council or on one of the lay ministry teams, or as teachers or helpers in our church school, or you join others in some recurring or unique project such as a fundraiser or trustees' work day. Others offer your gifts in smaller, less-visible ways. You work quietly behind the scenes to offer a timely word of encouragement, to make a caring visit or phone call, to offer someone a ride to a doctor's appointment. In meeting the needs of all of us or the need of one of us, you seize the opportunity to harvest new life, to make Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God real in this place, in this day.

"The harvest is plentiful," Jesus said, "but the laborers are few." So he prayed that God would send laborers into the harvest. And God did. And here we are, each and every one of us. Thanks be to God.