

## CUSTOM HARVESTERS

Matthew 9:35-10:8

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

How do crowds affect you, crowds at the bank on payday, in traffic jams, waiting to get checked out at the grocery store? Do you always feel kindly towards crowds? If we could see individual faces in crowds maybe we'd feel more kindly to them. I want you try something. <sup>The next time...</sup> Try to focus on individual faces in a crowd. For example, when you're in a traffic jam, notice the expression on the face of the woman in the car behind you through your rear view mirror. Next Christmas notice the faces of parents in the shopping mall looking for presents for children. Very likely you'll see the face of someone feeling harassed and helpless.

Two weeks ago I was depositing my paycheck in the bank when I focused, involuntarily, on a face in the crowd. A young mother entered with a child screaming his head off. "Give me one more chance," he pleaded. "You've had all the chances you're going to get," his mother shrieked. Every eye in the bank turned to the poor woman as she dragged the boy. He slipped from her grasp and fell on the floor kicking and screaming. The bank clerk serving me lost her concentration and had to begin my transaction again. "Stand up and behave," the mother pleaded. When he stood up he hit his head on the counter and started screaming again. I saw tears and panic in the mother's eyes. She felt harassed and helpless. We all felt harassed and helpless.

Jesus was able to look at a crowd and focus on individual faces. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd, harassed and <sup>helpless</sup> left bleeding by wolves. Their political leaders were blind to their plight. <sup>they felt harassed by Roman occupation, indignities, taxation</sup> Their religious leaders should have offered some solace but had imposed on them heavy spiritual burdens far more weighty than Roman taxes. But Jesus had compassion on the

crowds. The word translated "compassion" is actually a much stronger word. It implies pain, the kind of pain we feel when we see loved ones suffer. Compassion takes a heavy toll. Think of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus. Prometheus felt sorry for us humans and brought us fire against the will of Zeus. Zeus penalized Prometheus's compassion by chaining him to a rock. Every day an Eagle came and devoured his liver. Every night his liver grew back. Prometheus's compassion brought him terrible pain. And the compassion Jesus felt for harassed and helpless crowds led him eventually to the pain and suffering of the cross.

When I look at crowds in shopping malls and grocery store check out lines I see a lot of harassed and helpless people whom Jesus loves. I think, in particular, of a couple in a poem by Stephen Dunn. Harassed as children by religious leaders, they now feel helpless to prevent their

daughter from going to Daily Vacation Bible school with a friend. Listen!

It was supposed to be Arts & Crafts for a week,  
but when she came home  
with the "Jesus Saves" button, we knew what art  
was up, what ancient craft.

She liked her little friends. She liked the songs  
they sang when they weren't  
twisting and folding paper into dolls.  
What could be so bad?

Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith  
in good men was what  
we had to do to stay this side of cynicism,  
that other sadness.

OK, we said, One week. But when she came home  
singing "Jesus loves me,  
the Bible tells me so," it was time to talk.  
Could we say Jesus

doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible  
is a great book certain people use  
to make you feel bad? We sent her back  
without a word.

It had been so long since we believed, so long  
since we needed Jesus  
as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was  
sufficiently dead,

that our children would think of him like Lincoln  
or Thomas Jefferson.  
Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief  
to a child,

only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story  
nearly as good.  
On parents' night there were the Arts & Crafts  
all spread out

like appetizers. Then we took our seats  
in the church  
and the children sang a song about the Ark,  
and Hallelujah

and one in which they had to jump up and down  
for Jesus.  
I can't remember ever feeling so uncertain  
about what's comic, what's serious.

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.  
You can't say to your child  
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks  
of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have  
a wonderful story for my child  
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car  
she sang the songs,

occasionally standing up for Jesus.  
There was nothing to do  
but drive, ride it out, sing along  
in silence.

*A lot of people feel harassed/helpless. Political leaders, Religions, "that ancient craft"*  
*use the Bible to make us feel bad.*  
Jesus calls us to minister to harassed and helpless people like this couple. He says, "Pray  
*those people like*

therefore for the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field." Compassion

involves prayer. We pray for more laborers, more resources to get the work done. We pray like

everything depends on God and we work like everything depends on us. Compassion also leads us to take action. Jesus sends his followers out to preach good news, not bad news. "Jesus saves!" "Jesus love me, this I know for the Bible tells me so." And Jesus sends us out to heal people. Yes, heal! We don't hear much about healing in the church today. But we're going to hear a lot more about healing in mainline churches in the coming years – not just by the more conservative but by liberals – people open to seeing Scripture and experiencing God in new ways. We're moving out of the old world of cynical skepticism about God's action in human experience and moving into a new world where we recognize that God is alive and heals.

Many of us desperately need healing – not just physical healing but healing for a terrible, <sup>we feel harassed/helpless</sup> debilitating sickness of the soul. We have a wonderful story to tell our children and neighbors. <sup>There have a wonderful story etc would do us well to listen & contemplate</sup> No story ever told compares to the story of Jesus. No other news is as good as the good news that proclaims that God has come to us in Jesus Christ to save, teach, and heal us (all of us) – body, mind, spirit, and soul. Jesus sends us to proclaim good news and teach stories that give meaning to human life. He sends us out to teach songs - songs about the ark, songs that make us shout out "Hallelujah" and make us want to jump up and down for Jesus. When you leave this sanctuary know that Jesus has called, commissioned and sent you to tell the good news that Jesus saves, teaches and heals the harassed and helpless multitudes.

Gracious God whose son, our Lord Jesus Christ, had compassion on harassed and helpless crowds, may your Spirit empower us to continue his ministry. Give us power, imagination, energy and love to tell someone good news, to teach our children the old story of Jesus' love, to heal the sick and comfort the distressed. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.