

The Lord of the Harvest

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 1992. Scripture Lesson: Luke 10:1-12, 17-20.

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

1. I was visiting the Delps on Thursday and I said to Vernon, "Tell me about harvesting wheat." Vernon went on to tell about growing up on the farm, harnessing a team of horses, and how he once fell asleep on the side of the field and let the team of horses plow all by themselves. He told all sorts of other farm related stories and about a half an hour later I learned that you have a relatively short harvest season for wheat. If you harvest wheat too soon it doesn't ripen. But if you wait too long the grain drops off. So when it's time for harvesting the wheat you do nothing else all day but harvest. If it looks like its going to rain, you don't stop for lunch. You don't stop for dinner. You don't stand around and tell stories. You work from dawn to night until all the wheat is harvested.

The same thing's true of roses. I asked Duffy about harvesting roses. "How long do you have?" Duffy said, "Just a couple days at most". If you cut a rose bud too soon it never opens up and doesn't become as beautiful as it could be. But if you wait until it opens up then it's too late and the petals will fall off. There's just a relatively narrow window of opportunity for harvesting roses.

2. There are times of spiritual harvesting as well. ~~When it happens the church needs workers, missionaries, pastors, educators, doctors, nurses to cure the sick and preach the gospel.~~ In our Gospel lesson, Jesus knew that the time for a spiritual harvest had come and there was no time to lose. After nearly three years of cultivating the soil and planting the seeds of the Gospel, Jesus knew there were many men and women in the towns and villages of Palestine who were ripe for conversion. ^{no time to waste. Opportunity.} He appointed 70 to gather

the harvest but he lamented that 70 wouldn't be enough. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

3. There've been times in the history of our nation when the harvest has been plentiful and the laborers insufficient to the task. Most of us don't realize how spiritually and morally decadent our nation was in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. When our nation celebrated the first 4th of July there was an abysmal moral slump in the United States. Drunkenness was epidemic. According to one historian, of a population of four million, 300,000 were confirmed drunkards. Profanity and blasphemy were rampant. Prostitution and other forms of sexual immorality were widespread. Census statistics show that between a quarter and a half of all brides were pregnant at the time of their marriage.

The churches were languishing. Episcopalians and Congregationalists were deeply influenced by enlightenment skepticism and rationalism. The Methodists were losing more members than they were gaining. The Baptists were barely holding their own. The Presbyterian General Assembly officially deplored the ungodliness of the country. The Rev. Samuel Shephard, of Lenox, Massachusetts, said that in 16 years he hadn't taken one young person into membership. Voltaire, the French skeptic, said, "Christianity will be forgotten in 30 years' time". Tom Paine preached this message cheerfully all over America. "The Church is dead. Christianity is dead."

College students prided themselves on their rejection of Christianity. They took a poll at Harvard and discovered only one practicing believer in the whole student body. At Princeton, they discovered only two believers in the student body. They had a mock communion service at Williams College. They had anti-Christian plays at Dartmouth. They

took a Bible from a Presbyterian church in New Jersey and burned it in a public bonfire. Kenneth Scott Latourette, the Church historian, said, "It looked as though Christianity were a waning influence, about to be ushered out of the affairs of men."

But then something strange and unexpected began to happen. In 1795, a minister, Isaac Backus, began to urge Christians of every denomination to meet together for prayer. They set aside the first Tuesday of January and once each quarter after that. They prayed for God's harvest. They prayed for laborers to go forth and reap the harvest. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists began to meet together in small groups to pray. *and God began to bless,*

In August of 1801, at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, hard-drinking, swearing frontiersman came from out of the woodwork to Presbyterian camp meetings. Thousands of people walked and rode for miles to hear the Gospel preached. These rough, tough frontiersman were reduced to tears, fell on the ground trembling, and rose up to commit their lives to Christ and his Kingdom. So many people were converted that Presbyterians in Kentucky begged the church to send out more preachers. "The harvest was plentiful but the laborers were few."

In 1802, Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale began to call the students to renew their minds, to repent and believe the gospel. About a third of the entire student body were converted. There were so many conversions that Dwight couldn't counsel them all. The harvest was plentiful but the laborers were few.

From that second great awakening came many programs of social reform. The modern missionary movement was born. Soon, nearly every Presbyterian church had a missionary society. The Presbyterian church sent out missionaries out of all proportion to our numbers. Wednesday evening prayer meetings were initiated in nearly every

Presbyterian church. The Sunday School movement was born out of this movement. Its purpose was originally to provide free religious education to poor children. Out of this Second Great Awakening the abolitionist movement received new vigor. Lyman Beecher and other evangelists began attacking social and cultural evils such as dueling, slavery, alcoholism, and prostitution. They promoted peace and prison reform. Beecher preached that an unreformed nation cannot help but come under the judgment of God. And people responded to the Gospel in unheard of numbers.

But harvest times don't last forever. The harvest came and went. In the middle of the 19th century the country was seriously divided over the issue of slavery. People were making money hand over fist, and they turned their backs on God.

4. I believe there are times of harvest ahead of us.^{unemployment, homelessness, families in crisis, drugs, violence - war} Think of Oxford. There are about 3000 people in Oxford not counting the outlying areas. There aren't enough churches in Oxford to contain all those people if they all came at once. We have over 500 members and another 100 or so on the roll of baptized members. Our new church, when completed, would be too small to accommodate all of them.

But I believe in the the Lord of the Harvest. Even now there's something of a harvest among the junior highs. Drew and the Parents Support group are praying that God would provided, from our congregation, youth group leaders. Pray the Lord of the Harvest to raise up workers. We have a hundred or more elementary age children. The Christian Education committee wants to start a weekly youth group for these young people but we don't have the workers. "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

We have many elderly people who can't come to church regularly. I thank God for those of you who visit some of these people faithfully. But the demand is far greater than

the supply of visitors. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

But it's easy to become blind to what God is doing around the world. The harvest is plentiful in Eastern Europe and South America. The fastest growing churches in the world are in Africa and Asia. There are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the United States. In Romania and Russia ministers can't be trained fast enough to keep up with the men and women who are turning to Christ. At the last Urbana Missionary conference sponsored by Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, 20,000 college students met for a week during their Christmas vacation. At the end of that week 3000 of them dedicated themselves to serving Christ as cross cultural missionaries. Of those 3000, the largest group of young people offering to go out as missionaries were Presbyterians. They've been brought to faith and nurtured within the Presbyterian and they want to go as Presbyterian missionaries. But the General Assembly doesn't have the money to send out new missionaries because local churches are cutting back on their mission giving. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

What can we do? The first thing Jesus says is, "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Ask! Since early in March a small group of Men, never less than four of us, have been meeting at Philip's florists to read and discuss the Scripture and to ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into the harvest. On Wednesday mornings at Ann Bailey's another small group of women meet to study the Bible and pray. At 6:30 on Thursday mornings a group of Oxford area ministers have been meeting for prayer.

What if every women's circle meeting sceduled quality time for prayer that God would send out laborers in our church and throughout the world. What if every Session meeting, every Deacons meeting, every committee meeting spent some quality time asking

the Lord of the Harvest to provide workers and a great harvest. The needs are so great and the workers are so few.

Several months ago I went to the Presbyterian Historical Society to do some research on the history of our Church. I read all the session minutes from 1837 until 1870. I wanted to discover how the Session dealt with their plans to build a new church. I was amazed to discover not one reference to the planning, funding, or building of the church. The year the church was completed the Minister called Session meeting to discuss and pray for a revival of religion in Oxford. They built a large church, larger than they needed at the time. But they believed in the Lord of the Harvest. They believed that God was going to give them a harvest. The Session met. They prayed. The Congregation prayed. And God blessed.

Ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into the harvest. What is involved in this asking? What if some of us got up at 6:00 in the morning to pray or have a half-night in prayer. What if some of us would give up our lunch time and pray at a noon-day prayer meeting with Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Baptists and Methodists?

We can cultivate the soil and remove the rocks. We can plant the seed. We can water. But only God can give the harvest.

Let us pray: Risen Lord Jesus, we remember the way in which you called the disciples to be with you, and recall how you sent them out, two by two, invested with your authority to speak about the Kingdom of God, and your power to cast out of hearts all that makes for death and destruction. Bless our desire to bring your message to this parish and to our entire world. Help us first to spend time with you, and may it be your voice in our hearts which shall bid us go forth to do your work. And just as you rejoiced at the simplicity of your first disciples, and through this saw the power of darkness fall, so give to us the uncomplicated response of children of the Heavenly Father. This we ask for your name's sake. Amen.