

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“It’s His Harvest”

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Luke 10:1-20

The Church in America is losing. At Good Shepherd, our membership is in decline. In the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod our membership is in decline. Across the nation, mainline denominations are all shrinking. The culture is changing. The hearts of many are growing cold, as God said would happen in the last days. Younger adults are largely absent. Only 49% of millennials in America consider themselves Christian, and of those, only a small percentage is regular in worship. Not just indifferent, the Word of God is being met with more opposition.

It’s never been easy for the church, but it seems to be getting more difficult these past years. If you’ve ever looked for volunteers to help with VBS, Sunday School, Meals on Wheels, PTL you know how difficult it can be. Pastors and teachers are also getting harder to come by too. A couple of weeks ago, Dr. Matthew Harrison, president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod told us in fifteen years we could go from 6,000 pastors in the LCMS to 3,000. What all this means is that fewer people are doing more.

I’m not out to blame the culture or have a pity party or pine for the glory days. I’m just giving voice to what you’ve already noticed. In America, the church is losing. It’s difficult work.

It was difficult work two thousand years ago as Jesus was sending out the seventy-two to teach and preach and heal. He’s right there with them, in the flesh, looking them in the eyes, and he tells them it’s going to be arduous. He says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” That’s another way of saying “You will be understaffed.” There’s far more work out there than you can do.

He tells them the environment will be hostile. “I’m sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.” They *will* attack you and hurt you. That’s what wolves do.

He says, “Take along no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals.” That is, you’ll be working on a tight budget.

He says, “Greet no one on the road”. That is, the work is urgent. There’s not a lot of time for pleasantries or dawdling.

He says, “You will be turned away” by individuals, households, even whole towns. Don’t expect to be welcomed or well-received.

He says, “The one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

If the seventy-two were looking for a pep talk to boost their courage and confidence, they would have been disappointed. He’s not blaming the culture or having a pity party or pining for the glory days. He’s just giving them the hard truths so there are no surprises.

And yet, there’s grace in this text. The seventy-two go and do what Jesus asks them to, and they return rejoicing. Despite the very real obstacles and difficulties, the Lord of the harvest was working among them. He guided their work and blessed it too. The seventy-two didn’t have to worry about provisions because God saw to it that they are provided for. Though many rejected them, some received them and heard the Gospel and believed and supported their work, providing food and shelter. Even with all the challenges, they experienced some reward for their labor. They experienced “sufficient success.”

And so it is with us, right? One example: in the days before VBS it was hard for the leaders to find other volunteers. But they kept at it, calling and coaxing, and the volunteers came through. I know we couldn’t have done it without our high school volunteers who were just excellent, and worthy of the admiration of the little kids. But also, our retirees, like Ron Wille who on the last day said to me, “I’m too old for this”. But you sure wouldn’t know it when you listened to him teach those kids. And in the end, some seventy kids or so went home happy and tired, knowing they were loved by God and loved by God’s people. “Sufficient success.”

That’s the way it will likely be with our school too. This next year, we may have the same number of students with one less full-time teacher. Everyone will be asked to do a little more. But I know it’s going to work because I know the faculty and staff God has given us and how God uses them, speaks through them, teaches through them. The children *will* grow in wisdom and stature and in their knowledge and love for God and that’s quite enough. Sufficient success.

So also, in the church. We are an aging congregation, which means there are many homebound calls and some hospital calls too and lots of funerals. But that’s not wasted time. That’s ministry, doing what we are called to do,

bringing hope in Christ to those who are dying, assurance and peace in Christ to those who are grieving, encouragement in Christ to those who are ill, or lonely. It makes a difference in lives when our Parish Nurse calls on people, or when Pastors Tegtmeier or Thompson visit people or when the Stephen Ministers have coffee with their care receivers—that's all good stuff, important too. When members die or move away, we notice their absence. We notice the empty chairs. Though they have slipped out of our hands, they have not slipped out of God's. God hasn't lost them. They remain His. We've done what God has asked us to do, and there's sufficient reward in that.

Meanwhile, other important work is happening, works of mercy such as with the Safe Families, or Sandwiches in the Park, Food to Go and Grow, School Supplies for Watertown children, Family Nights, Bread and Roses, Fishes and Loaves, Meals on Wheels, Food Pantry, all things I believe God would want us to be doing. Does it translate into lots of new people believing in Jesus? Not in ways that are measurable. But we don't help people just so we can get them in our pews and give them a box of envelopes. We help them because God has placed them in our paths as neighbors in need of help. We help them because that's who God wants us to be. Helping them in the name of Christ is sufficient success.

And there's encouragement also in the fact that Jesus told the seventy-two that God is the Lord of the harvest. That's very good news for them and for us, for any of you who volunteer in the church. It means the harvest does not depend on us. It's His harvest. It can be discouraging. But God is the Lord of the harvest.

In John 6, Jesus said "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day (v. 44). God alone has the power to give life to those who are spiritually dead. It's His harvest. He is the Lord of the harvest. What a relief that is to us. We are not ultimately responsible for the success of the harvest. We do what God tells us to do. We do it as well as we can, because we are working in His name and for His sake. But then we commend the results to Him and His will.

The seventy-two would be rejected by many, but they did not need to bear that burden. They need not take it personally. They need not feel like failures.

So also, today. If people walked away from Jesus because they didn't like what he said (as the crowds did in John 6), you can bet far people will reject those Jesus sends today to preach and teach and serve in His name.

We don't need to bear that burden. We don't need to feel like failures. We don't need to become puffed up and proud when successful. We don't need to take it personally when not. We only try to be faithful to the work God has given us to do, working at it with all our hearts as to the Lord. And we thank God for the little successes He gives that help us carry on.

When the 72 returned, they returned with joy. They were *most* excited, of course, about the authority that Jesus gave them (for that time) to drive out demons. That must have been fun, and the razzle dazzle results were surely impressive. "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"

But Jesus redirects their joy. He redirects it beyond *their* efforts and experiences, their successes to the gracious work of God. He says, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Who wouldn't give anything to have the assurance that our names are written in heaven, that we belong in heaven? But we don't have to give anything. We don't have to do anything. It's all been done for us and given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ. Rejoice in that!

Your worth is not determined by your ability or inability to drive out demons in His name or make disciples. It is determined by the One who purchased and won you with His blood.

Your identity is not determined by being the most altruistic member of the community. It is determined by our God who put His name on you in Holy Baptism.

Do not rejoice so much that you live in a beautiful home; rejoice that heaven is your home.

Do not rejoice if you have a high-tech security system guarding that beautiful home; rejoice that you are resting in His hand and there, are perfectly safe.

Do not rejoice that you have a healthy body, but that you belong to the body of Christ.

Do not rejoice that your folks may give you a nice inheritance; rejoice that you are heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ. You are aliens and strangers on earth. Your citizenship is in heaven.

So, as you work in the church, volunteer in the church, or serve in Jesus' name in the community, do not be discouraged. Whether small or large, the harvest belongs to Him. He is Lord of the harvest. You don't need to bear that burden or responsibility. We do the work God has given us to do. We do it to the best of our ability. Then we rest and commend the harvest to Him. And we rejoice that our names are written in heaven, not because we've earned it, but because the Father has given it to us, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.