

“The Harvest Is Plentiful”

Matthew 5:13-16; Luke 10:1-9 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 26, 2022
Installation Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might grow in faith and trust
that our future as a congregation is held in your hands. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

There was a meme going around on social media a few years ago that suggested that one of the most underappreciated miracles in the gospels is that Jesus, in his 30s, had twelve close friends. We can unpack what that says about loneliness in our modern culture another time, but let us never neglect to give thanks for the blessing of community! The question for today is whether 12 close friends sounds more or less unlikely than 70 disciples.

Did you remember that Jesus sent out 70 disciples to prepare the way for him in villages all over the place? We don't hear much about these folks. We don't know their names; we don't know where they went. We hear briefly about their return later in chapter 10, when they came back excited about their power over demons and Jesus encouraged them to be more grateful for their place as beloved children in the family of God. I think there might be a reason we don't hear too much about these 70 disciples. I think maybe Luke wants us to wonder if they might be us. Or rather, that we might be them.

Certainly, there are some things about this story that feel familiar. If you were looking for a biblical theme for the work of our Nominating Committee this spring, “the laborers are few” would have fit the bill. We’re in a moment when things are a bit thin. As we install our Lay Leaders today, many will receive their blessings in absentia, and gaps in the roster will be obvious. But “the harvest is plentiful,” and so we forge ahead.

Jesus sent them out without purse, without bag, without extra sandals. Ill-equipped and without back-up supplies. “Like lambs into the midst of wolves,” he said. What? Why? I don’t think Jesus was trying to make it hard; it’s just that that was how it was. This isn’t an easy thing he’s called us into, being church. Community is a blessing, but it’s a blessing that runs counter to the clannishness of human nature that insists we should only trust and depend on those like us. The work of church is hard now like it was then. We probably don’t have all the tools we wish we did, and there will be times when it seems there aren’t enough of us to get the job done.

Things aren’t just thin in terms of numbers. Our own sense of capacity, as individuals, our verve, our get-up-and-go is low. The past two years of pandemic stress have worn us down and out. Jesus’ description of salt that’s lost its flavor may feel like an apt metaphor for our energy levels. Except here’s the thing: that question about how you restore saltiness? It’s a trick question. Salt cannot lose its saltiness. That’s not chemically possible. The questions about salt and light are two different questions. Salt is our identity. As followers of Jesus, baptized into Christ and made

one with the family of God, our identity cannot be taken away from us. Even if we're not feeling our salt, it's still in there somewhere. It's the question of light that we need to attend to, because it's not about identity but circumstance. Even a dim light can change the darkness, so the question is not whether we can shine or not, but whether we're choosing the bushel basket or the lamp stand.

The laborers may be few, but "the harvest is plentiful," Jesus tells us, and it's still true. The work of God is before us, with so many options for different ways to engage. What could it mean for us to proclaim that "the kingdom of God has come near"? How do we do that in ways people can see, and see as light illuminating a path forward, rather than the blinding beam of an interrogation spotlight?

I see a number of different clues and encouragements in this story of the sending of the seventy. First of all, it's vital to notice that Jesus sent them out in pairs. None of us is called to do this work alone. We are in community. We're being church, and church is community. Even and especially when there aren't a lot of us on the volunteer roster, we are here to support one another. Whether you're in a position of elected leadership like the ones we'll officially install today or simply in a position to lend a hand with whatever effort is before us, we're all called into service, together. Whether your light is flickering or burning bright, the lampstand we build together helps us share that light.

Secondly, Jesus recognizes that not all our efforts will bear fruit. There will be those who do not share in the peace we offer. Importantly, Jesus makes clear that this

resistance will not steal our peace. It's merely a sign to move on. There is no point in wasting time worrying about what didn't work; rather, it's better to admit that it didn't and get on with things. Our way is not the only way, and not even the best way for some. What matters is to find the people for whom the way we offer is peace and light, so that they, too, can benefit from the blessings of community.

Finally, there are some very important words in the middle of this passage: "Ask the Lord of the harvest," Jesus says. There's a reason he sent those 70 out without much in the way of luggage. When the church accumulates too much baggage, we forget that our work is dependent on God. It seems impossibly hard because we're assuming we're supposed to be able to do it on our own. But we're not. The plan assumes that we're going to rely on God. That's the only way it works. That's why, when we ask you as Lay Leaders to commit to your roles, we don't just list your tasks. We ask you to commit the "basic Christian disciplines of worship, prayer, study and stewardship," so that your work is undergirded by deepening spirituality. When we say, "with God's help, I do," it is first and foremost a promise to seek God's guidance and strength for whatever the task in front of us is.

We can let our little lights shine because we're tapped into the light of Christ. We can spread that light farther when we shore up the lampstand that is the church. This is how the glory of the kingdom of God in our midst is revealed. Let's join in the miracle and let our lights shine! Hallelujah and Amen!