

June 15, 2008

**Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 6** (Matthew 9:35-10:8)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

*The Rev'd John F. Herring, associate rector*

In the summer of 2005, shortly after moving to Sewanee, TN, Keri and I had some unfinished business to tend to in Atlanta and decided to make a trip back. The traffic on I-24 was awful. During the course of this traffic jam, a man in a white pick-up truck pulled along side of our car. He was looking at me, trying to get my attention. I wondered, "What is this man trying to tell us? Is a brake light out? Is a door ajar? Does he need directions?" I rolled down my windows and he rolled down his. He shouted out to me, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal Savior?" I was sort of surprised, a little bit amused and perhaps just a little bit annoyed. I then answered him that I was about to start seminary in two weeks. He simply said, "OK" and rolled up his window, never looking at me again. But, I found myself admiring that man, because he wanted to share the good news.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask of the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers into his harvest field." Jesus sees that many are ready and willing to hear his message. He sees that his disciples are eager for God to act in the world, to make the Kingdom of Heaven a reality in the world, an earthly realm, where God is in charge and God's people are vindicated. That is what the Apostles are hoping for, but the Kingdom is greater than that. It is a place where we can experience God's grace, God's love. It is a one-way love, unearned. Grace brings life and sustains life. Grace heals. We can experience this grace, no matter our baggage. No matter how inferior we feel. That is the Kingdom Jesus is proclaiming. A Kingdom where humanity is restored to God and all of humanity can experience God's grace. However, more needs to be done in order to spread the message, to announce the Kingdom. Therefore, Jesus commands the Apostles to pray for more laborers to reap the harvest, the harvest that will help bring about this message of the Kingdom, the Harvest that will gather up people who are ready to hear the message, who need to hear the message, the message of God's favor, God's grace.

God answers the prayers of the Apostles. God will act in the world. However, the Apostles will also be agents of change. This is no longer a one-man enterprise. Now, it is a group effort. Jesus commands them to go and "preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is near." Jesus also commands them to heal, knowing when people experience God's love, real healing can happen. However, the ministry of Jesus, has always been one of preaching and teaching first and foremost, and that is the command we have from Jesus. We cannot bring healing into the world if we are not willing to preach and teach, if we are not willing to share our faith, if we are not willing to share the good news that God is with us and loves us.

We Episcopalians are good at many things. We do many good works as a response to Christ. We clothe and feed the poor. We build houses. We worship and give thanks with reverence. Many of us are faithful in our attendance on Sunday and many give to

the Church, so that the Church can carry out its mission. However, we are uncomfortable sharing our faith with others, even our friends. We equate evangelism with stories like that man on the highway or other stereotypes, which we find unappealing. The truth of the matter is we are now the Apostles and we are required to proclaim the good news. If we expect God to act in the world, we have to be the agents of change. By sharing ourselves and our faith with others, we can bring healing and inch the world ever closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

One summer I worked in a hospital in Naples, Florida. Each day we would go from room to room in the hospital and ask people if they wanted a visit. It was an opportunity for the patients to talk or pray. One of the lay chaplains on staff, Ben, met a woman one day who flatly rejected him. She said, "All of you are the same. When I tell you I am not a Christian, you try to convert me and tell me that my beliefs and my past mean that I am going to hell." She went on and when there was a pause in her list of objections, Ben told her that if she ever wanted to share her story, he would listen without judgment. She agreed. He returned the next day, but she rejected him again. She feared Christians. She feared judgment. She probably feared God. The next day she was discharged from the hospital.

The same woman was admitted to the hospital again about a week later. Ben went to her room, and she rejected him again. She said that maybe they could talk another time. Before this happened, the hospital released her again.

Another week went by and she returned to the hospital for the third time. This time when Ben visited, she said she wanted to talk. He sat and listened to her for quite a while. It was quite a life story. It was clear that this woman made mistakes in her life. There were also moments when she was victimized. Furthermore, she revealed to that she needed a liver transplant or she might not make it out of her 30s. This woman was not whole; she did not have a sense of God's peace within her. She never experienced God's grace, only judgment from other Christians. In fact, she was angry with God.

However, she started to express interest in a relationship with God. She said to Ben, "I think God might finally want me on God's side. Maybe that is why you keep coming to see me." Ben replied, "God has always been by your side and has always wanted you on God's side. You only have to accept that and be open to God. God still loves you regardless of your past." This made her happy. Her eyes welled up. She smiled and asked if Ben would return the next day with a list of scripture readings for her. So, Ben bought her a study Bible, returned the next day with it and a list of scripture readings. She and Ben talked a little more. And then she then asked if he knew of a Church where someone would listen to her, without casting judgment. The next day he gave her that reference, which was an Episcopal Church, by the way. She then wanted to pray with Chaplain Ben. The same woman who rejected Christians now wanted to pray with one. The same woman who thought Christians were judgmental now had an invitation to Church, an invitation to the Body of Christ, an invitation to a life with hope. This is not a story of some heroic chaplain. He merely shared God's grace with a simple message.

This was a harvest moment. It was a healing moment. It was the work of the risen, living Christ today.

The work of the harvest is not easy. Look at the Apostles. Even after Jesus empowered them, they labored in the fields until they died as witnesses to Christ. But, they did advance God's kingdom. I'm sure that the woman from the hospital has difficulties ahead. But, the living Christ keeps calling her, inviting her to experience God's grace. The living Christ keeps calling us too, calling us to preach, teach and heal.

Tomorrow, All Saints will send 18 people on a pilgrimage to Greece, a land that has brought forth a fruitful and lasting harvest for God's kingdom. Our pilgrims will come home changed in ways that may not be discovered for years. Those changes are all part of their growth in faith, bringing them closer to Christ. Those changes will further equip them for a life out in the fields. They and all of us are being called to bring the good news to the world. They and the rest of us are called out to the harvest. In what fields might you work? With whom will you share your faith? With whom will you share God's grace?