

### ***The Free Gift ... Abounded for Many***

In the name of him who died for us while we were still sinners, dear friends in Christ: Today we begin the long season of numbered "Sundays after Pentecost". And as we do, we return in St. Matthew's Gospel more or less to that place in Jesus' ministry where we left off back at the end of the Epiphany season. From here until the end of the church year, the Gospel lessons will all follow in sequence from St. Matthew.

So, to get oriented on the timeline of Jesus' career, let's start with a little review. We're some six to nine months into the first year of Jesus' public ministry, which takes place almost exclusively in Galilee. Jesus has been busy. By now he's made a name for himself as a powerful and insightful Bible teacher, he's called the twelve disciples, he's preached the Sermon on the Mount, and he's performed a number of miracles including many healings, the driving out of demons, the calming of the storm, and the episode in which he raised up a quadriplegic and by so doing, he proved to his startled onlookers his authority to forgive sins. The tide of his popularity is still definitely on the rise. He keeps moving throughout the region, visiting as many towns and cities as he can. And reports of his whereabouts precede him, so that when Jesus shows up someplace, people are ready to receive him. They flock to the local synagogue to hear him teach. Oh, and they remember to bring with them anyone in the family who is sick or injured.

Up to this point, Jesus' ministry has been a one-man operation. Yes, his disciples are with him, following along like ducklings; but they aren't yet carrying any of the load. They are still very much in training. They are watching Jesus in action. They are listening to his message and learning to repeat it. They are studying how Jesus interacts with people and how he deals with their problems. To a certain extent they are learning to mimic that too.

And just in time, because Jesus is getting swamped. His fame has risen to the point at which the press of the crowds who want to hear him and demand that he answers their questions and deal with their issues is far too great for one man to handle. And it's important that we recognize this. It's easy to think, "Well, he's God, isn't he? So, what's the big deal? God can handle anything." That's true. And yet we must remember that Jesus is also a man. And during his earthly ministry he lived as a man. He never used his divine power for his own benefit. And thus, working nearly around the clock day after day, not even taking time to eat much less get adequate sleep, in addition to traveling long distances on foot – all these are taking a toll on him.

What's driving him, though, is that he sees how great the need is. He looks at the masses of humanity who come to him with all of their problems both physical and spiritual, and he has compassion on them. In his innermost being, he aches to relieve their suffering. To him they are like sheep without a shepherd "harassed and helpless" the text says. The Greek words actually mean having their skin flayed and having been thrown down, like off a cliff or into a deep ravine. They've been abused and mistreated.

And so they have. Consider: this is a time long before the blessings of modern medicine have allowed us to mitigate (to some degree) the corrupting physical effects of sin's curse. Thus they are subject to the ravages of all kinds of diseases we've long since eradicated. They have no antibiotics to treat infection, no sterile surgical methods – they don't

even have aspirin. Imagine what our lives would be like without those things. Two thirds of us would likely be dead. Of the living, many would be blind, lame, deaf, in constant pain. But as bad as that is for these people, even worse is the spiritual abuse they've been subject to. You see, they do have shepherds, their religious leaders and teachers who are supposed to be guiding and feeding them; but they've been doing a terrible job of it. Instead of giving their charges peace of mind and rest in God's forgiving grace, they've been laying on crushing burdens of laws, rules, and regulations they can't begin to keep; and when they fail, as they must, they are tortured by guilt, shame, disgrace, and the fear of God's impending judgment. That in turn is an open door for Satan to afflict them with unclean spirits.

Jesus looks over these suffering masses, he sees the immense need, and he invites his disciples to see it too. "The harvest" he says, "is massive; the workers few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

From what we know of the disciples and their tendency to think in concrete terms and so misunderstand, I'm pretty sure Jesus had to unpack that for them. I imagine them looking at each other asking, "Harvest? It's not even that time of year. What's he talking about?" And then with infinite patience Jesus having to explain that he was speaking of the crowds of people and all of their issues.

And then, having opened their eyes to see the great harvest, and likely having led them in asking for more workers, Jesus (who is the Lord of the harvest) answers the prayer. The text says, "He called to him his twelve disciples". And the word "called" there is more than just "hey guys, come over here". No, it means "to be called for a purpose". We might say *appointed* or *ordained*. So doing, he gives them authority to do the very things he's been doing: casting out unclean spirits, and healing diseases and bodily afflictions. He charges them to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Indeed, the powerful signs he authorizes them to perform are proof of it. In them we see the undoing of sin's curse. They will be setting Satan's captives free, and restoring what has been corrupted and ruined, made subject to weakness, decay, and death. Their works will point ahead to the day when Satan's power will be overthrown completely, and all things will be made new. And the thing to see is that these apostles will not be doing this on their own, rather they are extensions of Jesus' ministry. Through them *he* will be working to restore the lost and advance the kingdom of heaven. Through them he will multiply his reach and effectiveness so that more souls are saved. Through them the free gift of grace he brings will abound to many.

We are then given the names of the twelve disciples. It's a diverse group. None, that we know, were trained theologians; though all of them would have been schooled in the basics of the faith. Four of them we know for sure were fishermen by trade, two sets of brothers, partners in the same business. Less is known about the others, but from what we do know, it seems that Jesus was interested in taking men from all walks of life and from both ends of the political and social spectrums. For example, Philipp is the only disciple who has a Greek name. It suggests that he came from a family of Hellenized Jews. I mean, there were the very conservative traditionalists who clung fiercely to the old ways, and there were the more progressive Hellenized Jews, who were more open to adopting the ideas and customs of the surrounding Greek culture. Usually these two groups didn't mix socially. As disciples of Jesus, they do. Even more poles apart are Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Cananean, an Aramaic word that means "zealot". The former had been functioning as an agent of the hated Roman oppressors, while the latter was part of a terrorist organization that fought to rid the Jewish homeland of the Romans. In their lives before discipleship, these two would have been

more likely to kill each other than to break bread together. And yet in Christ they become brothers in the Lord's ministry.

Last mentioned is Judas Iscariot, who later betrayed Jesus. It's worth pointing out a few things here. First that Jesus gave him the same authority as the others, and it's safe to assume that for a while, at least, he exercised it. It tells us that he was a believer and that through him the Lord did good work for the kingdom. That he later fell away doesn't negate the good that Jesus accomplished through him. And that he did fall away and betray the Lord stands as a warning to all of us. No one however faithful, gifted by the Lord, or empowered for his ministry is past succumbing to temptation, to falling into error and unbelief, and to being lost forever. As the Apostle Paul warns elsewhere, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." We need God's grace, his forgiveness, and the power of his Spirit to remain faithful. Let's not forget it.

But it's precisely to extend his grace and strengthen our faith that the Lord sends laborers into his harvest. This we see Jesus doing at the end of today's lesson, as he sends his disciples out in pairs to proclaim the coming of the kingdom, and, as he says, to "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, [and] cast out demons."

This sounds very impressive to our ears; but what needs to be highlighted here is the extremely limited nature of this first sending out of the disciples. They are still in training. And this sending out is sort of a dry run. Jesus commands them stay away from Gentile lands, and not even to go to the nearby Samaritans. They are to go only to those who are of the house of Israel. Later, of course, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, he'll send them into the entire world.

Even more limited is the work they'll be doing. At this point, Jesus sends them out with the message that the kingdom is at hand – but it's not here yet, not in its fullness anyway. And they are to treat only symptoms of sin's curse, rather than get to the root of the problem, which is sin itself. Yes, healings and exorcisms and even raising the dead are spectacular in appearance, but far greater is the work they will do later when after his death and resurrection, Jesus will authorize them to declare the forgiveness of sins in his name. That's the real power to rescue from Satan's domain and demonic control. That's the power to cleanse hearts and minds from the leprosy of sin. That's the power to raise souls from the death of sin to eternal life.

And that is the power that Jesus now exercises through his Church in which he still calls men of widely diverse backgrounds to be workers in his harvest field, to restore the lost and advance his kingdom, to multiply the effect and reach of his ministry, and to extend the free gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus so that it abounds to many.

The harvest is still plentiful. The laborers are few. Therefore, let us pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to continue to send laborers into his harvest field and to make them faithful to their calling, that the work of Jesus to save the lost may go on, and that the full harvest may be gathered to him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***