

Harvest

Part 1, Matthew 9:35-38

Matthew 9:35-38 (NIV)

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³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Once upon a time a traveller came upon a beautiful valley in which there was a ruined village. In the centre of the ruin was a large dishevelled building and sitting in the shade against one cracked wall was an old man puffing on a long stemmed pipe. The traveller approached the old man and enquired as to what tragedy had struck the village, was it a war or pestilence or act of nature? The old man puffed once on his pipe and screwed up his old eyes to focus on the traveller. "'twas none of them that brought this village down"; he said, 'twas stranger than any of them". With that the old man closed his eyes and appeared to go to sleep and just as the stranger was about to take his leave the eyes of the old man sprung open and he began to speak.

"This here", the old man said pointing to the building he was leaning against, "was the wheat house". "Wheat was everything to us". "Because of wheat we stopped wandering the wilds in search of food and settled in this beautiful valley. Because of wheat we built proper homes and added to them year by year. Because of wheat we had more time, so people decorated things, built things, beautiful things, we had music and dancing it was wonderful. Because of wheat we never went hungry, we found more and more delicious ways to bake bread and of course there was the wheat beer," the old man cackled.

After another pull on his pipe the old man continued; "Because of all wheat had done for us we built this here wheat house. Decorated it throughout with sheaves of wheat, carvings of summer stalks and offerings of bread. The wheat house soon became the centre of our life. Songs were composed and sung in thanksgiving to wheat. Older members presented talks on the care and cultivation of wheat. The wheat house became so busy that members of the village were appointed as full time overseers".

The old man stopped talking for a moment his face visibly collapsing at some painful inner memory. In a quiet strained voice he continued; "one day people started to notice the wheat crop was decreasing. Alarm spread throughout the village and many meetings were held in the wheat house to discuss the situation and offer prayers. And still the wheat stores went down and down, so more meetings were held and songs was sung to lift everyone's spirits. Then in one meeting a young feller rose to his feet and asks a question; "why don't we plant more wheat he says". Many

there jumped to their feet, angry they was. They demanded the young man sit down, they said he was making them out to be bad wheat men, telling them their duties, them whose built the wheat house and created its glory. Soon after, the young feller left the village and many other young ones followed. After a time hunger drove the rest to leave and travel far to find food, all except me”, the old man wheezed pointing to his legs, “these old legs won’t carry me anymore”. After a pause the old man looked long at the traveller and pointing with his pipe for emphasis said;” No it weren’t storm nor war nor pestilence that destroyed this village it was forgetting what drew us here in the first place, young man do not forget your purpose, without purpose people perish.

In an era in which busyness bleeds us dry, to make commitments to anything requires some purpose but to make great commitments requires a great purpose. The 19th century English poet Matthew Arnold put it this way:

*“But often, in the world’s most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us—to know
Whence our lives come and where they go.”*

— **Matthew Arnold: The Complete Poems**

A thirst to spend our fire and restless force. There are two kinds of people in the world those who have given their life to a great purpose and are constantly energised by the fullness of it and those who have not given their life to a great purpose and from time to time feel the emptiness of it. In Matthew 9:35-38 Jesus shares with his disciples a great purpose. In his mind eye Jesus looks out upon all the peoples of the world and sees an endless golden field of wheat. Row upon row of human beings bursting with goodness and potential that will wither on the stalk unless there is a harvest. Jesus has already told his disciples that he will make them fishers of men (Matthew 4:19) now he ups the ante and gives them a vision of not just a net full of people for the kingdom but a world full of people for the kingdom. This harvest was to be the disciple’s purpose and it is the purpose of the church and it is a sad thing the church becomes when it loses its great reason for being.

We call Matthew 9:35-38, a hinge passage because the whole thrust of Matthews gospel hinges on these few lines as Matthew transitions from the sermon on the mount to the missionary work of the disciples. He begins with this incredibly succinct summary of the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. (Matthew 9:35)

What an incredible description of life with purpose. Jesus is working his way systematically through every large town and every tiny village. No place was to be missed, no people were to be left out. As many people as possible were to be given the opportunity to hear Jesus teaching and preaching and to receive or witness his healing. In teaching Jesus explained how the Jewish scriptures spoke about the establishment of a new reign of God, called the Kingdom. In preaching Jesus directly appealed to their hearts and their souls that the kingdom had come, now was the time to enter into a deep and fresh relationship with God, while the healings authenticated this message before their very eyes. People saw that this Kingdom was real, they saw the power of God on display banishing suffering and darkness.

The response to Jesus teaching, preaching and healing was mixed. Some believed quite rightly, that Jesus was challenging the status quo and were infuriated. Others were fascinated. But there was a small number of people, from this village and that city, who were not only fascinated but captivated. Who gave up their beliefs, their work, their place in society, their very lives, in order to follow the man from Nazareth and his mission of the Kingdom. By the end of Jesus ministry around 120 followers (Acts 1:15) had remained committed to Jesus despite years of hard traveling, opposition, arrest and crucifixion. Now it may appear at first sight that 120 members isn't a remarkable return for three years work but it has to be admitted that it was enough, as this 120 people began a church that today numbers around two billion.

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In this one small sentence the entire mission of Jesus is spelled out, this in a sense is the **what** of the life of Jesus. Jesus now goes on to spell out the why and the how, the vision and the strategy.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

Now we might think, oh that's lovely, Jesus cared for the people. But we need to remember that many viewed Jesus attitude as extremely politically incorrect. Many did not see themselves as harassed and helpless, many did not see themselves as sheep without a shepherd. They saw themselves as successful people, faithful Jews and loyal sons of Abraham and were deeply offended by the implication that they did not have it all together.

"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. (John 8:39)

Let's be very clear, we have returned again to the days of Jesus. We live in a post-Christian, post-church era. This is a secular society and within this society, our purpose, the purpose of the church, to declare that all people desperately need God is politically incorrect and deeply offensive. And if we are going to be followers of Jesus we have to decide whether Jesus is right or society is right. That either people need God or it is flat out wrong to believe people need God. It's either one or the other because we can't serve two masters. In this way we need to be clear, that the price we pay to believe and live out the purpose of the church is to deliberately step into politically incorrect waters. But that's OK because Jesus walks on the water and he has the power to help us carry out our mission no matter how hostile the waters might become. More importantly this vision is not about being right; it's about love.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

I've seen this word picture when I worked on a farm in New Zealand. One afternoon we found a stray dog harassing the sheep in a back paddock. We drove off the dog but many of the sheep were out on their feet, their hearts were pounding, they were gasping for breath and visibly shaking with fear and distress, all because there had been no shepherd protecting, watching over them and keeping them safe. I was really concerned for those sheep and I don't really care much for sheep. I care much more about people and over the years I have seen so many people harassed and helpless because there is no shepherd in their life. I have seen so many young people without love and without purpose implode into the emptiness of their own hearts. I have seen so many relationships between husbands and wives that on the outside appear fine but on the inside are cyclones of hurtful emotional forces. I have seen apparently well-adjusted and successful men abandon everything in a desperate attempt to find something and I have seen so much loneliness in people's hearts.

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The harvest begins in love, in a profound compassion for the human condition and the belief that only the good shepherd can truly heal and guide us.

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,*

³ *he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

⁵ *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

⁶ *Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalms 23:1-6)*

This shepherd has been all these things for me and the only rational response I can come up with to such goodness is to desire this same life for other people. This is the

vision of the kingdom the **why** we do what we do. The harvest is the mission, the **what** we do, and the **how** of all this, the strategy, is contained in these next two sentences.

³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:37-38)

Jesus asks the disciples to pray to God, the Lord of the harvest, for ordinary people to commit to the mission. The funny thing is that in the very next verse Jesus sends these same disciples out on mission. What is Jesus saying? He is saying that when you become a follower of Jesus you are also signing up to participate in the mission of God. When we pray for workers for the harvest, and clearly this is something we must commit to, constant earnest prayer for people to participate in the harvest, but when we pray, the expectation in the spirit of God is that we offer ourselves as one of those workers.

We began this message with a story about a community that lost its purpose and lost its way. It was a true story, there are any number of empty churches that bear witness to this truth. The other side of this truth we read in Matthew 9, that when the church lives and breathes its purpose, it is an unstoppable force.

David Ring was born with cerebral palsy. Ring's father died in 1964. Cancer took his mother four years later leaving him orphaned at fourteen. Depressed from the combination of losing his parents and the difficulties of his disability, Ring dropped out of high school. Ring specifically struggled with losing his mother, the only woman he believed would love him. According to Ring, he attempted to commit suicide many times over the course of the following two years due to his depression. With the encouragement of his sister, however, he committed his life to Jesus in 1970 and returned to Liberty High School in Missouri, where he graduated in 1971. Ring earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from William Jewell College in 1976. His catch phrase is "*I have cerebral palsy and I serve the Lord with all that is within me, what's your excuse?*"

<http://www.channelc.net/tvchannel/David-Ring-They-Put-My-Body-On-A-Table-in-the-corner-and-left-me-for-dead>

As we come to communion this morning I would like to invite you to re-commit your life to the purpose of the church.

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. (John 12:24)