

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
June 18, 2023

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

I recently drove with my niece from Colorado back to Wisconsin, with a quick stop in Kansas to visit our aunt. We managed to drive through Colorado, Nebraska, Missouri, just a corner of Kansas, Iowa, and Wisconsin. In that time, we drove through a lot of fields. Lots of corn mostly, with tiny little sproutlings, since it was so early in the summer.

And so, though I don't really know anything about farms, it's hard to be a citizen of this country and not have at least some experience looking out onto vast expanses of fields. I like looking at all the huge watering devices keeping those little sprouts growing and seeing the farmers out on their tractors or in their pickup trucks, or even once on a horse. Because agriculture is such a huge part of our popular imagination as Americans, I think I can sort of get what Jesus is saying today when he is talking about the harvest.

Often in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks about the harvest when he is talking about God harvesting the entire earth and everything on it at the end of time. But today, Jesus isn't talking about the end times. Instead, he is talking about mission. He is talking about the work that he wants his friends and disciples to do. A few weeks ago, we celebrated Pentecost, where his disciples were ready to graduate and become the leaders of the church. But as we do every year, we have turned the clock back and restarted our Bible story, and right now, Jesus is calling his disciples for the first time and telling them what it will look like to be workers in God's fields. And the big question today is: when we look out at these huge fields at the end of summer, how on earth are we going to get that harvest in when there are so few people to help?

I've heard the expression "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" my whole life. And the way I have always heard it is as a lament about how few Christians there are to carry out God's work. I mean, there are 2.56 billion Christians in the world, which seems like a lot of laborers to me. But, on this reading, I actually was more interested in the harvest than I was in the laborers. Because Jesus is saying that the harvest itself is plentiful—kind of like driving through field after field after field.

And so, it turns out, our problem is a problem of abundance, which is something we have been talking about at church for several months now. It's really easy in almost every stage of life to sort of close in a little bit and worry about not having enough. And, actually, there is a perversity in human nature that seems to want to focus on what we don't have rather than what we do.

But Jesus is saying that there is plenty all around us—we just need to figure out how to get it all into the barn.

I think this gospel story perfectly exemplifies the nature of a Christian. We are always brought in and healed and then sent right out again to work. The doors of a church are always revolving. It

is not in the nature of God to bring you into St. Mark's and then have you sit here unchanged. It is in the nature of God to have you transformed into a new creature, washed by baptism, fed by the eucharist, instructed by the scriptures, matured by the liturgy, and sent out to be God's worker in the field.

And, in our context, and with our specific call as a parish, all that work comes down to radical hospitality. We don't use watering machines and combines and tractors. We use coffee pots, and book clubs, and the summer of service. As a community, we spend the majority of our time and energy welcoming folks who are seeking a community of love, of service, and of worship. Maybe coffee socials don't seem as exciting as casting out demons and raising the dead. But for my money, I think the dead are raised when we sit around a table and have a cup of coffee.

Over the years, I have had the absolute pleasure of having a cup of coffee with most of you in this room at one time or another. And over and over again, I have heard people tell me that they were seeking something at St. Mark's that they weren't finding out in the world. I'm not looking for us to be deeply self-congratulatory, but rather, I want to name out loud the incredible amount of work it takes create a culture of radical welcome in a very old church. And, my friends, we did it.

And I think what we have seen is that Jesus words are true. The harvest IS plentiful. The number of people who are out in the world feeling isolated and in need of God and of community is as great as it ever was. So, even though it makes me a little uncomfortable to say it, I think the gospel is suggesting this morning that we can do even more. Maybe there are opportunities for welcome and hospitality that we haven't thought of yet. Maybe there are people in our lives and our work who would like to be invited to church but we just haven't had to the nerve to do it. Maybe there's a ministry in church that we have had our eye on but have been too bashful to try. There is so much bounty in God's harvest, and all we need are the hands to bring it into the barn.