

This morning, let's look at a story from the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 35-38.

Read Matthew 9:35-38

Jesus was going from town to town teaching the people about the love of God and healing them of every disease and sickness that He encountered. Verse 36 says that He had compassion on them because they were helpless and lost, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus realized that He needed help in spreading the Good News and caring for the people. He tells the disciples back then and us today: "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Father to send more workers into His harvest field." *The Message* paraphrases this verse this way: "When Jesus looked out over the crowd, His heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep without any shepherd. 'What a huge harvest!' He said to His disciples. 'How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands.'"

Here is one of those statements that separated Jesus from the religious leaders of His day. When He and the religious leaders back then looked at a crowd of ordinary men and women, they saw them from totally different perspectives. The Pharisees saw the common people as sinners destined for destruction; while Jesus saw them as a harvest to be reaped and to be saved. The Pharisees in their pride looked for the destruction of sinners; on the other hand, Jesus in love died for their salvation!

You know Jesus could have been up on the Sandias this morning looking down on Rio Rancho. And He would have seen the same thing that He saw back then; people suffering from illness, hunger, addictions, hatred, broken relationships, unemployment, and just plain lost, confused and overwhelmed by the demands of life. Can you see Rio Rancho in this text? Have you ever thought of Rio Rancho as a harvest field?

Well, when you do, you will realize that there is a lot of unplowed ground out there. There are approximately 101,500 people in Rio Rancho. How many of these do you think are associated with one of the 48 churches in the area? Well, I estimate that on any good Sunday, about 7,100 people attend a worship service in one of these local churches. That's just 7 percent of the entire population actively involved in a church. If you raise the number to 10,150 per week, that's still only about 10 percent. So my friends, there are plenty of harvest fields for every church in this community.

Now some of you may be getting uneasy and squirming in your seats right now, because I'm about to mention those dirty words – evangelism, faith sharing, and witnessing. Oh, how we hate to hear those words; they send chills up our backs and tightness in our stomachs. We

visualize images of television evangelists and standing on a street corner asking people if they have been saved. We are scared that if we tell someone about our Lord and Savior they will either reject us or laugh at us, calling us religious freaks or worse, fundamentalists.

It's like the man who was trying to be more diligent about witnessing and saw an opportunity when he was standing in the "10 items or less" checkout line at the grocery store. "All have sinned," he began, sincerely looking at the clerk scanning his items. "Including you, sir," she replied, without looking up. "I count twelve items here!"

So take a deep breath and relax. I'm not going to ask you to go and stand in front of Costco or Smith's, and ask each person who comes by if they have found Jesus Christ. I think that there is a better way to witness and share the Good News than following the example of some TV evangelists. I think we need to follow the example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as recorded in our text, and Abraham as recorded in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis.

One day Abraham is sitting in the shade of his tent in the mid-afternoon heat, when suddenly three visitors appear out of nowhere. At first, he does not recognize that this is the Lord Himself. Believing that they are strangers, he hurries to them. He illustrates the hospitality of the Near East at that time. He bows low to the ground, and politely addresses one of his guests as "my lord" and calls himself "your servant." He acts as if it would be a favor to him if they would allow him to serve them. He provides water to wash their feet and refresh them from their hot dusty journey. He provides a big meal for them and then he stands nearby assuming the position of a servant.

Now I am not saying that we need to do all these things, but we should copy Abraham's attitude, the attitude of a servant; the attitude of wanting to meet the needs of others, be they our neighbors or a stranger. Listen to what Matthew says Jesus did; He went out amongst the people. He went to the people just as Abraham hurried to greet his guests. They didn't stay in their home, church or comfort zone. They went to meet the people where they were and didn't wait for the people to come to them. This is one of my pet peeves about the church and ministers today. Many believe that their job description requires them to stay in the office or church building. They like to shuffle papers, work on sermons and talk on the phone; and if someone comes needing help then they try to assist them. I don't know where we got this example from, because it definitely wasn't from Jesus who made it a practice to go out among the people.

And while I am on this, both Abraham and Jesus made it a point to greet strangers, take the initiative to introduce themselves. Now we are definitely a friendly church, but as I have asked you before, do you know everybody who worships here? If I asked you to name everyone who is here right now, could you do it? When I was in Grants, I mentioned a certain person who

needed prayers and after the service a man came up to me and asked who that person was. I told him that it was the lady who had been sitting behind him for the past three months. He never turned around and introduced himself. Take time to greet each person and get to know them by their first name. Jesus knows each of our names, and so should we. Many of the mega-churches today practice mass evangelism instead of the one-on-one approach Jesus used.

Matthew tells us that while Jesus taught the people, He also healed their illnesses. In other words, He showed compassion and met their individual needs. There was something special about Jesus' power to see. The Greek word for "see" means not just seeing something as an object, but seeing with understanding. It means to see through something, to see something in its true condition. So when Jesus saw people, He saw them as they really were. If anyone knew the true condition of people, it was Jesus! He could look into their hearts. John 2:24 says, "Jesus knew all people," or as the *Message* paraphrases it – "He knew them inside and out." Jesus had a vision, a vision for all humanity; for each person, for you and me.

Verse 37 says that Jesus saw the people like a ripe harvest. There is always someone ready to receive the gospel of hope that only Jesus Christ can offer. John Wesley believed that in every season some people are receptive to the Word of God. God prepares them and He is looking for us, the laborers of His fields to pass on the Good News to them. Look around you today; there are people overwhelmed by the circumstances of life, and they are without the leadership and protection of a shepherd. Multitudes have no God, no faith, no love, no peace of mind, no hope and no purpose in life. They are without roots, and they have no spiritual home. When we open our eyes to the needs of others, we see people spiritually lost and critically hurting with all types of needs. To adequately fulfill God's purpose, we also must see life in its true condition; we need the eyes and vision of Jesus. We need Jesus to be our vision.

Okay, you are sitting there wondering where Reuben is going with this; what he is going to ask me to do. If he does not want us standing in front of Costco asking people if they have been saved, then what's he up to? As we approach Christmas, I challenge each of you to invite and bring two new people to church. I know that I asked you to do this a few months ago, and some of you did, and I truly appreciate that. Think about what a difference this would make in this church, our community and the lives of these individuals, not to mention our own lives.

Are you willing to try this? If you are, then this is how we can accomplish this. First, let's follow the instructions that Jesus gave His disciples in this morning's text – pray. There is no true vision without prayer. Jesus said: "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." Or as the *Message* paraphrases it: "On your knees, and pray for harvest hands." Prayer lets us begin to see as Jesus sees; to love as Jesus loves; to serve as Jesus serves. Prayer opens our eyes to see fields right in front of us ripe with harvest. It is prayer that opens our hearts as well as our eyes to those around us who are seeking the Lord.

Now somebody might think I'll just pray that someone else or Reuben will do it; after all, it's his job not mine to bring people to church and to know Jesus Christ. That's why we pay him the big bucks! Yes, this is my job, but it also the responsibility of every Christian. I don't think that Jesus was making any exceptions when He said in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." This command "go" is addressed to all of us who follow Jesus. We are all expected to be laborers in the Lord's field.

Let us pray: "Lord, renew my vision." A true vision means that we make ourselves available to become involved in the lives and needs of others. We all know people who are not currently attending any church, individuals who would benefit from having Jesus Christ in their lives and from the fellowship of this church. Pray for them; lift up their names daily in prayer. Ask God to open their hearts and make them receptive to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

After you pray for these individuals and God's guidance, then be an example for them. Earn the right to be heard by your lifestyle and words. How you live your daily life will say more to them than any words that you may utter. Relationships are built on trust and people will trust you when they see you living the life of a Christian – following Jesus, regularly attending church, studying the Bible, and caring for the needs of others. When your focus is on Jesus Christ and others, when you practice agape love – seeking the best for all, even those who hurt you, then you will earn the trust and the opportunity to share your faith, to ask that person to come to church with you.

Next obey the prompting of the Holy Spirit, be aware when God provides you an opening, an opportunity to share. This is when we have the vision of Jesus that I mentioned earlier. If you really stopped and thought about it, you would be amazed at the number of opportunities that God gives you each and every day to help someone and show them the love of Jesus Christ. Every day God provides countless opportunities for us to share our faith by either our words or our actions. We just need to be aware of this and look for these opportunities. As we travel through each day, let us keep our eyes opened and focused on Jesus. May God awaken us to the realization that true evangelism is loving the world the way God loves it, and allowing our hearts to be broken by the things that breaks God's heart.

And don't be discouraged by anybody or anything. All the great baseball players strike out. Remember even Jesus could not convince everybody to follow Him, for example the rich young ruler and Judas. But He tried and so must we. If they don't want to come to church, then tell them about our podcast and live streaming of the 9 am worship service. As a Christian, it is one of our major responsibilities to bring others into the fellowship of Jesus Christ and the church. Now you may feel that you are not qualified. But remember that God does not call the qualified; He qualifies the called. Jesus came to save the lost; and His concern for people has never diminished, and neither should ours. If anything, there is a greater need today than ever

before. If we are true disciples of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to reach out to those in need and share the Good News with them.

One day, a husband and wife were amazed to hear their five-year old daughter, Elizabeth, telling her little friend about Jesus. The children were sitting on the front porch of the house, and the parents tiptoed up to the window to see and hear better. Elizabeth told her friend that if she believed in Jesus and prayed, He would forgive her sins and she would go to heaven. The little girl was convinced and prayed. When she was done praying, she looked up at the couple's daughter and asked: "Will my mommy be in heaven with me?" Elizabeth thought for a moment and replied: "Yeah, if she believes in Jesus. But if you don't want her there, then don't tell her about Jesus!"

The same holds true for us. If we don't want someone to join us in heaven, then all we have to do is keep the Good News to ourselves. But honestly, I hope none of us feel that way. Billy Graham said: "For a Christian, the next worst thing to not going to heaven at all is to go to heaven alone." Think about the people you know – your neighbors, friends and family members – those that you want to spend eternity with you in heaven and pray for them, show them the love of Jesus Christ, meet their needs and invite them to church. Remember invite and bring at least two people to church during the holidays. The fields of Rio Rancho are ripe and God needs all the workers who will answer His call. Are you willing to be a worker for Christ? If so, then let the harvest begin! Amen