

Where Do Evangelists Come From?

Pastor Morgan Murray
West Valley Presbyterian Church

Text:

Matt 9:35-38 NRSV

35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for 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 laborers are few; 38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

During the month of July, we explored what it would look like – and rhythms of scripture reading, contemplative prayer, and reflecting on our lived experiences – that would enable us to keep in step with the Holy Spirit.

It seems to me that if we find ourselves keeping in step with the Holy Spirit, we are going to see our world with new eyes. We are going to see things the way Jesus sees them, and we are going to see God at work in the world in ways that we would otherwise not notice.

Our scripture lesson this morning is about evangelism. But more than that, it about how Jesus sees, and how evangelism is the natural expression of how Jesus sees people.

So what is happening in this text? Jesus is embodying gospel by teaching in the synagogues, preaching out in public, and addressing felt needs through healings. As he goes from place to place throughout Israel, hearing people's stories, and ministering to them. As he does so, Jesus sees a pattern. Wherever he goes – whether it is rural or urban, a town or a city, the people are in the same predicament. Matthew describes them as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

As you imagine these crowds, what other adjectives would you use? Exploited, used, beat down, utterly hopeless.

Where do we see groups of people like this today? On the side of the road, holding up signs asking for help. In homeless encampments. In neighborhoods ravaged by gun violence. In overcrowded emergency rooms. In long term care facilities. In refugee camps. In the streets of Cuba, Haiti, Hong Kong, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and dozens of other nations with governments that cannot meet the basic needs of the people.

These are the places where hopelessness is so evident, but we know that our neighborhoods have worn out, hope-starved people in them too. If we knew their stories, we'd see we that are surrounded by the hapless and the helpless, people trying to survive, not even aware of what it might mean to thrive.

When we are keeping in step with Spirit, we will find it increasingly difficult to ignore such people. When we see the world with Jesus' eyes, we can't NOT see them.

And in seeing these people, Jesus has compassion for them. He suffers alongside them. Hopeless people break Jesus' heart.

And then turns to the disciples and says: *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*

According to Jesus, the solution to hopelessness is evangelism.

There are reasons why pastors urge their congregations to engage in evangelism:

- It's biblical – it is something modeled in the Bible
- You should, ought to do this
- Awakened compassion in the church – which comes from Jesus

Our reason for doing evangelism should be awakened compassion, which comes from Jesus.

How can we awaken compassion? It's a natural result of keeping in step with the Spirit.

So where DO evangelists come from?

- According to Jesus, they are sent by God, the Lord of the Harvest.
- So it isn't my job, as a pastor, to *convince* you that should evangelize because evangelism is in the bible. It isn't for me to *guilt* you into sharing your faith with others. And for heavens sake evangelism IS NOT the solution to declining church attendance or decreased giving!

The solution to the problem is NOT volunteer recruitment!

According to Jesus:

- The primary motivation for evangelism is **compassion**,
- The primary problem for evangelism to solve is **hopelessness**, and
- The primary job of disciples in the service of evangelism is to **pray** to the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers.

Whenever I come to this text, I am reminded that that Matthew uses the same verb for the Lord of the Harvest to send workers into the fields that he used when describing how Jesus sent demons into a herd of pigs in the previous chapter. This is sending with intensity! Jesus is telling us to pray that evangelists would feel compelled out into the world, driven by compassion, into a shepherdless world.

This story strongly suggests that not all Christians are called to be evangelists. And with that, many of us will breathe a sigh of relief.

That said, ALL of us can have spiritual conversations. And that is going to be the focus of the

next four five weeks.

The average person comes to faith hears the gospel 9 times, by 5 people, over 2 years. So we don't have to "close the deal." But we can be one of those 5 people who invites people into spiritual conversations and who asks provocative questions born out of genuine care, curiosity, and compassion. We can do that.

And as followers of Jesus, there are things we have to do.

- B **Be with people**
- L **Learn their story**
- E **Embody God's Truth**
- S **Share your story**
- S **Share God's story**

We have to be out among people. We have to learn their stories. We have to embody the gospel with our lives. We have to be ready to share our story – the one of how God gave us a shepherd and gives us hope. We have to be ready to share God's story – the story of God came close to us in the person of his Son and leads us out of deadness and into true aliveness.

Jesus gives us a simple and clear command: "Therefore ask the Lord the of the Harvest to send workers..." So I propose an experiment. Let's pray for this every Sunday. Let's pray for evangelists to be raised up between now and the merger with GrX. Let's see how God changes who we see, and how we see. Let's see what God does.

The good shepherd is the one who invites us to this table. As we celebrate it, do so in eager anticipation of all those who have not met the Lord here yet, but will.