

Jesus in our Gospel reading for today says: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." With these words Jesus wants to teach us three things today.

First of all, he wants to teach us that the harvest is indeed plentiful. There are many opportunities for people to hear the Gospel. There are many who have not yet heard the name of Christ. But I'm sure we can think of many reasons why we think that the harvest is not plentiful, reasons why we think the field is barren, like there just isn't anything for us to do. Maybe we would ask: "Well, I don't know about this person that I've been talking to. It seems like they're never going to believe. It seems like they're never going to come to faith. Or this person over here. What good would it do to even talk to them? What good would it even do to say anything to them? It just seems like it's going to come to nothing." Or maybe we even think: "Well, the church is just getting smaller and smaller and smaller, and that's just the way that it is. We just have to accept it, because it's inevitable. That's all that's going to happen." But maybe we even just look at the mission field out there, and we think that the work is just too much, that we just don't want to do it, that there's just too much for us to do. How could I make a difference? How could one person change anything in the world today?

But Christians, the harvest is plentiful! Jesus says that it is. And he can bring in whoever he wants to bring in. God can certainly work miracles. After all, there was a time when you and I didn't believe. God gave us the Holy Spirit so that we came to faith. And if he could bring us to faith, why not someone else too? Or even think of the example of Paul. Paul literally murdered Christians simply for being Christians. Out of all of the people in the world, Paul seems like the least likely person to ever believe in God. And yet God brought Paul to faith, and he made Paul the author of more than half of the New Testament. And Paul even says about himself in 1 Corinthians 15 that "I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain." So the harvest is plentiful, Christians! If God can save a man like Paul, he can save anyone.

But maybe we would say: "Well, okay, but it seems like there's hardly anyone here. There's hardly anyone around us who needs to hear the Gospel. The field seems barren, if only because it seems to be so thoroughly picked over. Everybody I know seems to be a Christian, so what can I do in a place like this?" But Christians, this is not only true of faraway lands, although they too certainly need to hear the Gospel. Here at home there are many who need to hear the name of Christ. In fact, you may be surprised just how many there are. Let's just go purely by the numbers, going off the census and some other reports from the government. About 800,000 people live in this state, and based on reports, one-fourth of them are not Christians. That's 200,000 people in this state alone that do not know the name of Christ. And if you were to apply that evenly across the whole state, to go by county, that would be 450 people in Oliver County alone. 450 people who need to hear the Gospel. And that's just non-Christians! What if we include in that number people who have stopped going to church? They certainly need to hear the Gospel too. Across the board, average church attendance is less than half. Let's just be generous and say that it is half. Of that number, that would be 300,000 people in this state alone. And again applying it evenly, that be 700 people here in Oliver County. So just in this county, not even getting all the way to Bismarck, just in Oliver County, that is 1,150 people who need to

hear of Jesus Christ. That's more than half of our community. More than half of our state needs to hear the good news. The harvest is indeed plentiful!

But how do we reach them, we might ask? What can we do to bring them in? First of all, we should not be afraid to say something about Jesus. Jesus himself says in Matthew chapter 10: "What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops." We should not be afraid to speak up. Now, I know that that's not easy to do, especially when you're not used to doing it. And it can be very intimidating to share the Gospel with someone else. But God promises to be with us through it all. He even promised to give us the Holy Spirit to give us the words to say. So we shouldn't worry about saying the wrong thing or messing it up somehow, because really it's not even about us anyway. This is God's work. God is going to care for his Church, and he's going to care for you the way that he always has. So we can bring people to know Christ just by saying something about Him.

But the other way in which this happens is by living as the Christians that we have been called to be. Jesus again says in Matthew chapter [5]: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." And letting our light shine before others doesn't just mean doing good things or being nice to other people, although that's certainly included. But it means especially being Christians in the midst of hardship, being Christians in the midst of suffering. Because when we don't act the way that the world does when we're going through some difficult time, people are going to notice. They will see that we are different. And that will often lead them to ask questions, and it will create an opportunity that wouldn't otherwise be there. Just openly being a Christian and being one without shame can often open doors to speak of the Gospel! Now, if we don't want to be noticed, we need to remember what Jesus says. He says that we are light in the midst of darkness. We are a city set upon a hill. We can't hide the fact that we are Christians. Just like if you had a dark room and you shined a light into it, you wouldn't be able to hide the light. You're going to see it. But that's exactly as it should be. God has created us to be salt and light to the world. So don't be ashamed to be a Christian! Glorify God in everything that you say and do, and God will use it for good and for the good of his Church. This is how we bring others to know Jesus Christ by faith.

But it's so much, we might say! There's just so much for us to do. There's so many people out there. How can we possibly make a difference? And yes, it's true, Christians. It is a lot. That's why Jesus says the laborers are few. There will never be a time when the work is done. There will never be a time when we won't have anybody else to reach out to, even if we're just talking about the next generation. There is always more to do. But realizing this should drive us back to God, and that's very intentional. Because on our own we'd never be able to do it. On our own we would never bring anyone to know Jesus Christ by faith. On our own we would never reach one person through the Gospel. But we're not on our own. The harvest is not ours, but the Lord's. It is only through God that we are able to speak of the hope that is within us. It is only through God that we are able to bear witness to Jesus Christ. It is only through God that we can bring anyone to know him. We are tools in his hand, Christians. He does his work through us. Without him we are nothing, but through him we can do all of this work. This is why Paul says, speaking about his own ministry in 1 Corinthians 3: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." Just like right now we wouldn't have the harvest that we have without the Lord, so also the harvest of the world. It is his work, Christians, and he will be with us as we carry it out.

This is also why he finally tells us to pray, to pray that the Lord would send out workers into his harvest. In fact, prayer is the most important thing that we can do in carrying out the mission of the Church. We should ask God that he would bring people to faith. We should ask God that he would bring many in to be part of his Church. Paul says this very well in 1 Timothy chapter 2, when he says: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high places, that we may lead a peaceable and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." So we should not only pray for peace, Christians, although that's important too, because peace allows the Church to carry out its work more easily. We should also pray for all people, pray that they would become Christians, pray that they would come to know Jesus Christ by faith. In fact, as James says in his letter, the reason why we often do not have is because we do not ask. So if we want to carry out the mission of the Church, we must first begin on our knees. And God will answer that prayer. Has he not promised to do so through Jesus Christ his Son?

And be persistent in those prayers, Christians! Keep asking God to bring people in to the Church. We've been doing it here at church for months now, but it's not something that we should do only at church. We should also lift up our prayers and petitions every day that God would bring the lost to know him, that God would bring many into his Church. We can say things like: "O Lord, send out workers into your harvest so that many would come to know you." Or maybe we would say: "Teach me, Lord, to say what needs to be said for this person who's been asking questions. Help me to do what you want me to do." Or maybe we would even say: "Bring more people in, Lord. Bring our community in. Let them know the Gospel of your Son." The words that we use ultimately don't matter. What matters is that we ask. And God will answer that prayer. God will bring in more people as he has promised to do through Jesus Christ, his Son.

So Christians, speak the truth. Give a reason for the hope that is in you. Show the truth! Live as Christians so that others would come to know God. But above all, pray. Pray that God would send out workers into his harvest, and God will give the growth as he has promised to do through Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God Almighty, who has sent us out into the whole creation to proclaim the Gospel, give us the strength to do what you want us to do, and bring many to know you by faith, so that we may with one voice give thanks to you both now and in eternity; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.