

“Wanted: A Few Good Shepherds!”

Pastor Mary Robinson-Mohr

Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:15

Father’s Day Sunday, June 15th, 2008

If you’ve ever lived in a farming community, you know that everything revolves around harvest time. It makes sense, of course. If people make their living by farming, and if other people are depending upon farms for food, one does not just sit around when it is time to harvest. Once a crop comes to the stage of ripeness, it doesn’t just quit growing. It needs to be picked before it continues to its next stage, which for human beings usually means “before it goes bad.” When a crop is ripe, there is only a small window of opportunity to pick the crop and then preserve it in whatever measure to be eaten by human beings throughout the coming year.

One of my friends has spent most of her ministry in the farming regions of Reardan, Edwall, Wellpinit, Davenport, and Harrington, small towns out in the rolling wheat fields just west of Spokane. Now, all hands literally are needed to bring in a crop. My friend, Cindy, just throws ordinary ministry stuff to the wind during harvest, and she drives a grain truck for one of her farmer members. So when her congregation in mid to late August is just a few folks dressed in dusty clothes ready to run out the door to the fields on Sunday mornings, they offer prayers for the safety of all those working in harvest with heavy equipment and the stress of getting everything finished in and around the whims of the weather – and there’s always one in the crowd who likes to offer prayers specifically for the farmer that has Cindy driving a truck!

I once visited a college friend who lived on a wheat farm near Lind at harvest time. Jane and I spent most of the days down at the farm’s grain elevator, and she had to weigh trucks as they came in from the fields, and then help them unload and auger their grain in to the elevator. The news that week in the Lind area was about a neighbor farmer that had been struck with an inoperable and malignant brain tumor. Jane and her mother and all their neighbors were quite worried about this farmer and his family, since they had this crisis hit during harvest time! So, early on a Sunday morning, Jane, her Mom, and I and practically the whole community of Lind drove a bunch of food over to this neighbor’s farm. All the area farmers were throwing a harvest bee.

It was an amazing sight to see! Every farmer in the area had shown up for this harvest bee with equipment to help this family, and twenty-nine combines hit those rolling acres and had the entire farm harvested in one day. It was quite a sight to see three, four, then five combines roll over every horizon line within sight. The world as far as one could see held lines of combines marching over the tens and hundreds of acres of wheat. You could barely hear the person next to you, there was so much noise and work, and of course lots of dust. Then of course everyone had a great potluck when the fields were finally harvested that day.

So the deal is, when it is harvest time, you can't just sit around on your hands as if life is normal. There is a limited window of opportunity for harvest, and once it's gone, it's gone. You have to throw less important things aside, and jump into action.

So when Jesus looks out at the crowds who come to him for help and healing and guidance, he has compassion. He sees them as sheep without a shepherd. He tells his disciples, "It is harvest time, and it is a bumper crop! We don't have enough laborers to bring in this harvest, so we need to pray for more and get busy!" So he gives them instructions so that they can cover ground quickly, and he equips them to act on his behalf to bring healing and wholeness and restoration to as many people as they can reach.

As many people as they can reach.... That means they may not reach everybody. Not everybody may be receptive to their work or their message. Jesus gives them instructions for failure, in such cases. He tells them if they can't make any headway with some folks, they need to give up and move on. They need to move on because it is harvest time and there are other places that need workers. Harvest time is an urgent time!

That's an important instruction. Now, none of us wants to give up on certain individuals or situations. But sometimes the time comes when one must recognize one has done all that he or she can do, and it is time to move on. After all, there is a huge harvest. There is always more to do elsewhere, and Jesus requests that not a one of us sit and languish and burn out when there is more to do around the corner.

I'm glad Jesus gives these disciples instructions for failure, because failure is going to happen in Christian discipleship. The sights are set so high for our work. We are charged to proclaim the Good News everywhere, to be living signs of the Reign of God, to bring compassion and healing to every corner of the earth. There is bound to be failure. Even so, **failure does not give us an excuse to set the sights lower.**

You know what I'm talking about. We come to church, and we hear the successes of how God's Word has made all things new. We get excited. We want to be part of that. We are called to be part of that. But then we work and we strive to make all things new in our own world, and it gets tiring. And it doesn't always work. We make sandwiches to give to the mission for homeless people, and homelessness simply grows. It doesn't go away. We work to raise money for flood victims in one part of the world – Whew! What an enormous effort! And then a hurricane wipes out another whole part of the world, and then an earthquake levels another part. The needs seem endless. Then the neighbor, you know, that perpetually cranky one that you've been trying to treat kindly, cranks at you once too often.

It's all too much. Does all your hard work really matter? Is God really at work in your life? Then, one day, you realize the most emotion you've had at church is over someone

moving all the teacups without your permission, confound it all! You are not as moved when you hear of the throw away teenagers on the city streets, nor are you as concerned that more babies die in the world from dirty drinking water than any disease or war or anything else. Someone moved those teacups without asking you! Somehow, at some point, the fatigue and the failures of the larger matters of Christ's call have lowered your sights.

And you know what? Failure does not give you an excuse to lower your sights in discipleship. Jesus says, "Be prepared for failure. It's going to happen. Then move on. The harvest is huge, and we need to get going! My flocks need shepherds – move on to the flocks where you can do something, and leave the failures to me to sort out. Keep your perspective – and get going. There are too many sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless."

It has been written that the biggest cause of burnout among pastors is failure, the failure of the church to be the church. I have to think that this goes beyond pastors, and is part of what has caused our society to move from being "Christian" to becoming what sociologists now call the Post Christian Age. The Church has forgotten how to be the Church. People are disillusioned with the Church. It isn't just pastors who have burned out on these things. The Church has become too focused on who moved the teacups instead of the larger issues. Here we are in a time when there are so many sheep without a shepherd, so many people worried about their jobs, their homes, about the war in Iraq, about how the coming election will affect the future of the planet as well as the individual American. There are so many sheep today, harassed and helpless. The harvest is huge! Yet most churches in the United States are more worried about whether or not to serve Starbuck's coffee in the narthex, and whether or not to project words to the music in worship on a screen. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

A Methodist bishop, serving in Birmingham, Alabama, wrote about a day in his office that was horrible, his worst day of being a bishop. He said that he sat through an eight-hour marathon of nine appointments with complaining clergy all begging to be moved to a call in a bigger city. He was finally ready to go home, when his assistant said, "You've got one more appointment." His heart sank.

Two older women had come to see him, and they wanted to talk about their ministry in a small town in his conference. One began, "Gladys's grandson was busted on a DUI. We went over to the youth prison camp to visit him. We'd never been there before. We were appalled by the conditions. Those young men were packed in there like animals. We got to know them. Are you aware that only ten percent of them can read? There's an illiterate 19-year-old, and we wonder why he's in prison!"

The other woman continued, "We began reading classes, since Sarah taught school before she retired. That led to a Bible study group in the evening, and that grew to

three Bible study groups each week. Two friends of ours who are homebound and can't get out bake cookies for the boys. Some of those boys say those cookies are the first gift they've ever gotten."

Then the women continued, "We know that being a bishop must be a depressing job, seeing too many things that aren't getting done that Jesus expects us to do. So Gladys thought it would be nice if we came down here to tell you to take heart and keep going. Something's going right, at least in our town!"

Thank heaven for those people who keep their heads on straight about discipleship, and don't get distracted by silly stuff. Now, the harvest is plentiful, and we've got a job to do. Let's get going! Amen.