

Chasing the Harvest

Matthew 9:35-10:15

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Marisol is a farm worker and single mother from Mexico. She came to the United States to work in the seasonal fruit harvests. She is vice-president of the local chapter of Lideres Campesinas, a farmworker women's leadership and outreach group. In her own words:

*Working in the fields I earn \$300 weekly before taxes.
I'm left with \$280,
and out of that I pay \$30 for my weekly ride and \$10 for babysitting.
So to pay the rent here takes about two weeks of work.
My electricity bill comes to approximately \$200 when I am not working,
so that is a huge burden as well.*

*I've picked grapes,
and worked in the date palms, lettuce, broccoli, radishes and onions.
In November we pick lettuce and that carries into January.
From there we pick onions, radishes, cilantro, and chile.
That ends in April.
In May we pick grapes.
After the grape harvest we pick figs in June and July.
After the fig season we're home,
because there isn't any crop to pick.
Then there is no work for four months.*

*Before those four months without work
I try and save as much as I can,
and when I'm not working we have to limit expenses.
We go to food banks.
We can't even take our children to McDonald's.
Did you know there have been immigration sweeps in McDonald's?
We're always living in the shadows and can't live free.¹*

In March, the United States Department of Homeland Security declared Marisol's job as a field worker to be "essential" because it is critical to the nation's food supply chain. As an essential worker, she is exempt from government economic shutdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Matthew, chapter 9, beginning with verse 35.

*Jesus went about all the cities and villages,
teaching in their synagogues*

¹ David Bacon, "Stories from the Field: Marisol," *Farmworker Justice* (2013): <https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/stories/marisol.html>.

*and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom,
and curing every disease and every sickness.*

*When he saw the crowds,
he had compassion for them,
because they were harassed and helpless,
like sheep without a shepherd.”*

*Then he said to his disciples,
“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;
therefore ask the Lord of the harvest
to send out laborers into the harvest.”*

*Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples
and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out,
and to cure every disease and sickness.*

*These are the names of the twelve apostles:
first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew;
James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;
Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector;
James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean,
and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.*

*These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions:
Go nowhere among the Gentiles,
and enter no town of the Samaritans
but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
As you go, proclaim the good news,
‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’
Cure the sick, raise the dead,
cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.
You received without payment; give without payment.
Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts,
no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff;
for laborers deserve their food.*

*Whatever town or village you enter,
find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.
As you enter the house, greet it.
If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it;
but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.
If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words,
shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.
Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of
judgment than for that town.*

So get this:

Jesus talks about the growing of God’s reign as the harvest;
he refers to God as the “Lord of the harvest;”
he tells his disciples to pray for “harvest workers.”

He then sends his disciples out, leaving their families behind,
to chase the harvest among the ones for whom he has great compassion:
the sick, the grieving, the lepers, the ones plagued by demons.
These are the invisible ones, the rejected ones,
the ones who must stay out of sight and outside.
because they are not welcomed inside the house.

Then Jesus tells them to embrace the vulnerability of the ones to whom they are sent.
They are to take no money.
They are to bring no bag.
They are to pack no change of clothes.
They are to carry no staff to protect themselves.
And they are to move from place to place, staying where their work is needed and welcomed.
And when it's not?
|They are to shake the dust off their feet and move on.

Do you see the connection that I'm seeing?
Jesus sends his disciples out as migrant workers chasing God's harvest
among the harassed and helpless.
It's migrant discipleship.

Now, I want to be careful here.
I don't want to reduce the hard life of migrant workers in this country
for the purposes of a sermon illustration.
If you read more of Marisol's words, you'll know that she lives a very hard life.
She fears for her safety, her health, her income.
She lives next to fields that are constantly fertilized with pesticides.
She can't provide for her children in the ways that she wants.
She's constantly told to move faster, work harder.
She has a hernia as big as a watermelon, but she can't have a surgery
because she can't get health care.

It is a disgrace that our government calls these jobs essential to our food chain
while the ones who work them are exploited
and threatened with deportation by that same government.

And you know, some of the same things can be said in Elkhart County,
about immigrants who fill positions of "essential work"
but who don't have access to adequate health care,
and must live in the shadows.
There's a reason why coronavirus cases have spiked in our county,
among the Latinx community.

So I don't want to paper over Marisol's reality, and that of others like her,
merely to illustrate something about discipleship
that we can either accept or reject at head level.
I don't want to do that because that's certainly not what Jesus is doing.
Jesus actually teaches and then sends his disciples to go out like field hands,
as migrant workers chasing the harvest,
because that's who Jesus is, that's how Jesus works, that's for whom Jesus has deep compassion.
That's who God is, that's how God works, and that's for whom God has deep compassion.

This is the essential work in the Kingdom of God, because this reflects the heart of God.

Yet, too often, I think we as United States Christians
look more like lords of the manor
than field workers for the Lord of the Harvest,
Do we more often consider our mission to be *to* people like Marisol
rather than among them?

I've been asking myself questions like those a lot recently.
Do I allow myself to be vulnerable? Do you? Do we?
Why did it take a pandemic to shake ourselves awake to the realities
of our black and brown sisters and brothers?
I suspect that some of that has to do with the stop of sports, movies, routines, shopping?
Why is it only now that I, and the church, are getting serious about the inequities in health care
and resources that have had such a toll on minority communities?
As Christians, as a church, when do get to the laying our lives down for the sake of others part?
The question is: What do I do about this now? What do we do?

When confronted with questions such as these,
I think our first reaction is to get out there and do something, something big.
But look how Jesus' instructions to his disciples are set up,
where the source of mission comes from.

*When Jesus saw the crowds,
he had compassion for them,
because they were harassed and helpless,
like sheep without a shepherd."*

It's not our love that drives mission, it's the love of Jesus.
Because Jesus suffers with people in love, he seeks their healing and wholeness.
The disciples' mission is not motivated first and foremost by a desire to fix people
or to point out their sins.
It's motivated by love, by compassion -- Jesus' love and compassion.

*"Then Jesus said, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.
Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest.'"*

Before he asks his disciples to do anything else,
he tells them to pray, to pray to God for people to work the harvest.
From God's side, mission is driven because of God's love and compassion for people.
From our side, mission is driven through prayer.

Jesus did not say, the work is huge but the workers are few,
therefore, we need more production, more commitment,
more work, more time, more of your money.
And we're gonna go, go, go, go and we're not gonna stop until we get over that goal line.
No, Knute Rockne said some of it,
but Jesus didn't say any of it.
Jesus said, pray -- ask the Lord for more workers.

Where there is prayer, there is mission.
Simple as that.

"Jesus called his disciples to him and gave them authority to heal every disease and sickness."

Jesus not only calls people to mission,
he equips them for it,
he gives his disciples the authority to care, to help, to offer compassion, and to pray for healing.

*"These are the names of the twelve apostles: first,
Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew;
James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew;
Thomas and Matthew the tax collector;
James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him."*

You know, I was going to skip over the names of those apostles,
but I think they're important.
Jesus does his mission through a community of very different individuals.
We need each other even as we need Christ, prayer, and spiritual gifts.
Christian mission is a community enterprise.

With the love of Jesus, prayer, the gifts God gives us,
Jesus sends his disciples out.
We aren't called to be planters, we're called to be harvesters.
We chase God's harvest
and we rejoice together at what God has done.