

June 18, 2023
Matthew 9:35-10:8

Pentecost 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Moving On”

“The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

June is sometimes known as the month for celebrating “dads and grads,” honouring fathers and all who provide fatherly support on this Father’s Day as we also honour those who are graduating from high school, college, and university. Graduation day is an important milestone in the life of young people, marking the end of their student years as they transition into either another level of education or enter the work force. Among the traditions involved with graduation ceremonies are the traditional caps and gowns, which are sometime accessorized with hoods and tassels. In my high school, the tassels were especially prized, since it was the one item that we were allowed to keep after we turned in our caps and gowns following graduation. May graduates (including myself) would hang out tassels from our car mirrors, a statement to the community that we had successfully completed our course of study at North Plainfield High School. The tassel also played an important role in the ceremony as a symbol of success for graduates. After all members of our class had received their diplomas, the school principal instructed us to move our tassels from the right side of our mortarboards to the left, which is symbolic of moving on from being a student to our next stage in life. The movement of the tassel is a physical statement of the movement in the life of graduates that is celebrated in this ceremony, this rite of passage as they transition from being students to going forth and beginning the next stage of their lives and careers.

As I have been reflecting on my years as a student in this time when I have been celebrating my ordination anniversary, I can remember each of my graduation ceremonies and the mixed emotions those ceremonies evoked in me. It was a time of celebration, but also a bittersweet moment in which I was bidding farewell to the people and places where I had spent many years of learning and growing. I was leaving behind what was well-known and familiar to me as I embarked on the next chapter of my life, one that held great promise but also great uncertainty. Moving on is a time that can be marked both by rejoicing and anxiety, going from a past that is certain to a future whose story is yet to be written.

In today's Gospel lesson, Matthew reports that Jesus is continuing his ministry as he *"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."* (9:35). He continues his work despite the false accusations of the Pharisees that his previous healing of a *"demoniac who was mute,"* which led his opponents to pronounce that *"by the ruler of demons he casts out demons"* (9:32-34). Matthew's account of Jesus continuing to practice the two pillars of his public ministry – preaching and teaching – repeats almost verbatim the previous account of his ministry following his baptism and temptation: *"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."* (4:23). Using a literary technique known as *inclusio*, Matthew uses this summary statement twice to bracket this section of his Gospel. We have seen Jesus' concern for those in Israel who are sick, sinners, outcasts, or afflicted by demons. As he continues his ministry, Jesus shows compassion for the crowds who have come to him, *"because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* (9:36). These crowds were the uncommitted masses of Israel who are potential disciples of Jesus but are in danger of being misled by their leaders. In identifying them as "sheep without a shepherd," Matthew refers to Israel's history with unfaithful leaders, "shepherds" who were not faithful to God's call to care for God's people:

- "Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd." – Numbers 27:16-17.
- "Then Micaiah said, 'I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, "These have no master; let each one go home in peace."' – 1 Kings 22:17.
- "Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD." – Jeremiah 23:3-4.

Lacking faithful leaders to guide them, the crowds who come to Jesus are like "sheep without a shepherd." In Ezekiel, the image of the sheep without a shepherd describes the suffering of God's people due to the corrupt leaders of Israel: *"My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep are scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them"* (Ezekiel 34:6). The prophet foretold that God would come to shepherd the people

himself, uniting them under one shepherd, the Davidic king: *“As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on the clouds and thick darkness”* (34:12). By using this imagery from the Old Testament to describe the crowds as “lost sheep,” Matthew shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy; he is the new shepherd gathering the people of Israel. These crowds have expressed great enthusiasm over Christ’s kingdom (*“Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”* – 7:28-29), but there are no leaders to reap this spirited harvest for the Messiah. As Jesus looks upon this enthusiastic crowd before him, he senses that the time of harvest has arrived; so, he turns and says to his disciples that *“the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”* (9:37-38). In the Old Testament, “harvest” was a frequent symbol for eschatological judgment (*“Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for the wickedness is great.”* – Joel 3:13). While Matthew will use this image as a metaphor for judgment elsewhere, here it refers to missionary outreach, gathering disciples from all nations to continue to work that Jesus has begun among his people. While it is God’s act as *“Lord of the harvest,”* it will involve human workers rather than angels as God’s agents. The response of the prayer that Jesus instructs his disciples to pray is the mission of the disciples, who are to be an expression of the divine compassion for the needy people of God. *“The disciples’ mission is not voluntary activity initiated by them; rather, they are chosen, authorized, and sent by God through Christ.”* (M. Eugene Boring).

In order to accomplish this work of sending out labourers into the Lord’s harvest, *“Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.”* (10:1). While Matthew generally speaks of Jesus’ inner circle of followers as the “twelve disciples,” or simply “the Twelve,” here he refers to them as *“the twelve apostles”* (*apostolai*). This is not merely another title for Jesus’ followers; it marks a transition in their role from being students of Jesus, hearing his teachings and witnessing his miracles, to being those who are not “sent out” to continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. It marks a graduation, a time when they will move on from being recipients of Jesus’ teaching to being those who will be commissioned by our Risen Lord to *“go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”* (28:19-20).

- “All hands are needed for the missional tasks so essential to the work of the Saviour. We are not simply to pray for more workers, but we are to pray for the **right kind** of workers. They must be people sent by God, not people who are self-appointed, because the harvest is God’s harvest, and God is its Lord.” – Cleophus J. LaRue.

The symbolism of the number twelve was important for Matthew and for early Christianity, for it pictured the eschatological reconstitution of Israel as the people of God (“*Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’*” – 19:28). Matthew regards Jesus’ mission as continuing in the work of the disciples, who are given the authority to speak and act in Jesus’ name:

- “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you ... Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” – 10:19-20, 40.

By selecting these twelve disciples who are now to continue Jesus’ work as apostles and leaders of the kingdom movement, Jesus makes it known that his kingdom is the new Israel and that these twelve will play a central role in it. Matthew highlights that Jesus “*gave them authority,*” commissioning them to do what he has been doing: preaching, healing, and casting out unclean spirits who enslave God’s people. As apostles, they will “*participate in the authority of the one who sends them*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

- “The God who called you is now ready to send you forth, for the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. In truth, the sending forth that really matters only comes from God, [for] God is the Lord of the harvest.” – LaRue.

As the disciples will now be moving on to function with the authority of Christ, the discourse begins by charging them to go to the same lost sheep of Israel as Jesus, to proclaim the same message, and to perform the same healings, exorcisms, and even raising people from the dead. At this point in their ministry, Jesus instructs these apostles to “*go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (10:5b-6). This corresponds to the mission of Jesus, who Paul taught had “*become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to*

the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Romans 15:8-9). This mission to Israel was not abolished by the later command to *“make disciples of all nations”* (28:19); this is analogous to the relation between the commands of the Torah and the commands of the risen Jesus represented by Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill ... For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”* (5:17, 20). The priority to Israel demonstrates God’s faithfulness for God’s people. Israel was the nation called by God and given God’s covenantal promises, and Israel is the first to hear the Gospel. The exhortation to go to *“the lost sheep of the house of Israel”* recalls the crowds who appear to Jesus as *“sheep without a shepherd.”* As Jesus came to be the “Good Shepherd” who would faithfully lead God’s people, the apostles are not called to serve as Israel’s shepherds. The apostles are to accomplish this by proclaiming the same message that John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, that *“the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (10:7; 3:1, 4:17). Jesus not only authorizes his apostles but commands them to bring the power of the kingdom to bear on the needs of those they are called to care for in Jesus’ name: *“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons”* (10:8).

Matthew not only reports how the disciples are now called by Jesus to move into their new role as disciples, but he also names the twelve who are called into this new mission. The twelve are a diverse group of individuals, with varied backgrounds and gifts that they brought to their mission; they *“represented a wide range of personalities, backgrounds, and approaches to the problems Israel faced in the first century.”* (Mitch and Sri). Simon the Cananaean was known for his zeal for the Torah and for his nationalist and revolutionary leanings (Luke identifies him as a “zealot” in Luke 6:15). At the other extreme, Matthew had been working with the foreign oppressors to collect taxes from his fellow Jews, leaving it behind when Jesus called him to *“follow me”* (9:9). Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen who left everything behind when Jesus invited them to *“follow me, and I will make you fish for people”* (4:19), while Philip had a Greek name, indicating an openness to Gentile culture in his upbringing.

- “Precisely in this wide range of backgrounds, temperaments, and approaches, the Twelve personify the Church in all ages and its difficult task of purifying and unifying these men in their zeal for Jesus Christ.” – Pope Benedict XVI.

The commissioning of the Twelve as apostles who will be sent out to continue to mission and teaching of Jesus Christ is the beginning of the mission of the apostolic

church that in every generation is commissioned and empowered by our Lord to proclaim the good news of our Saviour to all people in all generations. It is a calling that begins for each of us on the day of our baptism, when we are *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). It is a call to parents, sponsors, and the entire church to make disciples of the children we bring to be baptized, to teach them what it means to be a Christian so that they may one day move into the role of a disciple who will *“learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and strive for justice and peace.”* As a baptized child of God who has been called by Christ to *“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”* (5:16), we are called into lives in which we are both disciples who gather to hear God’s Word and as apostles who are sent forth to *“proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (1 Peter 2:9), as labourers who are sent into the fields to gather others so that they might share in the joy of being God’s beloved children.

- “The needs are great. The workers are few. The world cries out for those who are willing and prepared to share the good news of the gospel; the good news that this is God’s world, and in spite of all evidence to the contrary, one day it will conform to God’s will and to God’s way. We are partners with God and our most ardent prayers ought to be for more workers to join us in this great calling.” – LaRue.

The moving of a tassel marks a moment in the life of a graduate when they move on from being a recipient of knowledge and to one who will share what they have learned with others in both word and deed. As God’s people, our call is to be both disciples who gather to hear God’s Word and apostles who will go forth and share that word with others. May we pray that God will continue to send labourers into the field, for the harvest is ready, people who are yearning to hear the Word of God that is the Word of light and life for a world in desperate need of the good news the apostolic church is called to share.

Amen.