

**From the Pulpit of  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA FL**

The Harvest Is Plentiful

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Luke 10:1-12

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Remember being at home and the doorbell rings? When you get to the door there are two people standing there. You think to yourself, “if there are two young men in a white shirt and tie, they are probably Mormons. If they are not young men in shirt and tie, maybe they are Jehovah’s Witnesses.” Or maybe you didn’t answer the door. I remember my mother wouldn’t answer the door if she thought the Jehovah’s Witnesses were ringing the doorbells. I guess that’s one thing that COVID stopped, as I don’t recall the last time I had any of those kinds of visits. I do recall several times where I said to the people, “look, I am a pastor of a local church. I don’t think this conversation is going to go anywhere.” The people still tried to engage me in a conversation. I don’t know how you reacted to those kinds of visits.

I remember my parents telling me about a visit a couple of people had. My father was the choir director at a small Lutheran church outside Philadelphia, and my mother was the organist. They told me that two people in that church told them about one day when the doorbell rang. The people opened the door, and standing there were two people who introduced themselves as members of a local independent Baptist church in the area. Maybe their first thought was, “At least you’re not Mormons.” After the introduction, they said they were part of an evangelism program, contacting local residents. “Are you involved in a church?” “Oh yes, we go to the St. John’s Lutheran Church.” “Is that the church where the pastor is a woman?” “Yes it is. She’s doing a great job, and we like her a lot.” “Well, if you keep going to that church with a woman pastor, you’re going to end up in hell.”

An evangelism program. The Greek word from which we get evangelism is εὐαγγελιον – euangellion. It means “good news.” It doesn’t sound like those two people who rang the doorbell were really sharing good news, does it?

I think it is honorable for those people to be going around the neighborhood ringing the doorbells and inviting people to attend their church. That’s not something we Presbyterians are comfortable doing. In fact, Tom Gillespie, a former president of Princeton Seminary, said one time, “What is the difference between a Presbyterian and a Mormon? A Presbyterian is someone who knocks on your door but has nothing to say.”<sup>i</sup> But there are times when people seem to have good intentions but end up giving a negative vision of what the Christian life is all about. And sometimes they may have good intentions but the message they are sharing is not necessarily the message Jesus gave us, the message Jesus taught, the message Jesus lived.

I remember a long time ago walking on the boardwalk in Ocean City, NJ. On the ocean side of the boardwalk was a group of people holding signs saying “Jesus is coming soon.” “The end of the world is coming soon.” And as I looked at the people I thought they looked to be among the most unhappy people one could ever see. What good news were they sharing?

In some of the books I have read I have seen that a majority of people – especially young people – have negative thoughts when they hear the word “evangelical.” There are words like

judgmental and homophobic that are expressed. Philip Yancey, a Christian author who is an evangelical, and whose books I very much appreciate, says that when he asks people what their first thought is when he says the word “evangelical,” he usually hears such things as “negative,” “condemning,” and “judgmental.” In his book called *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, Yancey says, “Some of us seem so anxious about avoiding hell that we forget to celebrate our journey toward heaven. Others of us, rightly concerned about issues in a modern ‘culture war,’ neglect the church’s mission as a haven of grace in this world of ungrace.”<sup>ii</sup>

But we are supposed to be about good news, and sharing good news. When Jesus sent the disciples out to the places where he intended to go, he sent them out to share good news, hopeful news, world-changing news. Now remember that this is taking place prior to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. So, when he sends them out, he sends them to share the good news that “the Kingdom of God has come near to you.”

Yancey calls it forgetting to celebrate our journey toward heaven. There are so many people who think that they have to do particular things, say particular things, avoid particular things, in order to make the cut and get into heaven. They are seeking to work their way up to heaven – even though they would never say that. I can’t tell you how many times in my ministry I have had people say to me, “I hope I’ve been good enough to get to heaven.” The good news is that the kingdom of heaven has come to us. This is how John says it in his gospel: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”<sup>iii</sup> Incarnation. Jesus taking on human form, as one of us, and dwelling with us, moving into the neighborhood, as Eugene Peterson has put it in *The Message*.

So many people think that following Jesus, or believing in Jesus, means that Jesus comes to get us out of the difficulty, even ugliness, of the world, that Jesus is our escape from the world. The reality is that Jesus, the Son of God, the Redeemer, the Savior, the Lord, *comes into the world* in order to redeem and restore the world, to reconcile the world to God, to heal the brokenness of the people and of the world and of the creation. As someone once said, we are to beware of encouraging people to work their way up to heaven, because we might miss in the middle Jesus coming down to the earth as one of us to live with us. The kingdom of heaven has come to us. That is powerful good news to me.

If any of us have any verses of the Bible memorized, it is probably John 3:16, and we have to include verse 17 with that. For many people, the most important part of the verse is “whoever believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” I emphasize something else in that verse. It begins, “God so loved the world that God gave God’s only begotten son.” God loved. God gave. God sent. And verse 17 says, “For God sent the son to the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” God loved the world. God sent the son to the world. God seeks to redeem the world. All of this God’s initiative, due to God’s amazing grace. Again, that is powerful good news.

It is that good news that we are to share with all of God’s people. Not just about life after death, but about life before death. The kingdom of God is about God’s mercy and grace and love and compassion for all people, even the ones who might not receive the disciples in their mission. God loves. God gives. God comes to the world in Jesus the Christ.

A number of years ago I heard a song by a group called The Imperials, called Lord of the Harvest. As you hear these words, hear them as a kind of charge to the church about what we are called to be and do, and take the thought with you as you go forth into the world, into the harvest that surrounds us.

Lord of the harvest, Place Your fire in me  
Servant You need now, Servant I will be  
Give me the eyes of Your Spirit, Your heart of compassion to know  
Wherever You may lead me, Lord of the harvest, I'll go.<sup>iv</sup>

Share that good news of the kingdom of God in all that you do.

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<sup>i</sup> Princeton Seminary Bulletin, July 1991

<sup>ii</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's so Amazing About Grace?*, p. 14

<sup>iii</sup> John 1:14

<sup>iv</sup> James Newton Howard & Paul Smith Sung by The Imperials, 1982