

***Called to Care***  
Matthew 9:35-10:8  
June 15, 2008

**I.**

I have mentioned before that this is the year we focus on the Gospel of Matthew. Perhaps you also know that Matthew's Gospel contains five lengthy discourses by Jesus on some important topics. If you looked at them in the Bible you would see a lot of red print.

The first discourse was the well-known Sermon on the Mount, and we have heard some readings from this part. They were about living as Christians in the world. Today's reading begins the second great discourse, sometimes known as the Sermon on Mission. In it, we move away from responsibilities to ourselves, and begin to emphasize our responsibilities to others.

I'm reminded of a sign that I saw at the entrance to a church. It was placed so that you could see writing on both sides of the sign. As you came into the church, it said, "Servants' Entrance." Then, as you left the church it said, "You are Now Entering the Mission Field."

That sign would be appropriate for today's Gospel. While many parts of Scripture are models for how we support each other inside the church, that is not today's reading. Today we look outside the church, and help people who also might be considered as modern-day lost sheep.

**II.**

But before we go into today's reading in more detail, I want to mention two things you might have noticed. They are interesting points even though they are ancillary to the main message.

First, this reading marked a transformation of the twelve from disciples to apostles. As disciples, they followed Jesus, were with him, and learned from him. As, apostles, however, they had to leave him, and go out into the world, and do the same type of work that he did.

In contemporary terms it might be like graduating from seminary and going to work in a real church. And for them, they no longer were just learning at the feet of the Master. They were called and empowered to put their experience into practice.

The second point relates to Jesus' seemingly curious instruction that the twelve were to go only to the Jews, and not among Gentiles or Samaritans. Why did he say this? After all, we know that the ministry of Paul was directed to the Gentiles. Paul said the Gospel was for "salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Ro. 1:16). And we will see later in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus told his disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations (28:19).

The answer is found in today's Old Testament reading from Exodus that describes God's covenant with the Hebrews as his chosen people (19:5-6). That has never changed. They suffered his wrath for their disobedience, but not his complete rejection. A remnant always was left, and Jesus knew that. He first wanted to give the Jews an opportunity to accept him as their Messiah.

Also, Jesus and the twelve were in the middle of a large Jewish population anyway, and he did not want them to go too far away on their first mission. Remember when your kids were little and asked to go outside. You told them to stay in the yard. That didn't mean they always would be confined to the yard. As they were ready they could go further. It was the same for the disciples.

**III.**

With that, let's examine the central parts of this reading. Matthew said when Jesus 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" (9:36-38).

We know from history that the Jews indeed were harassed. They had been captives in their own land for centuries, and were suffering under the boot of their most current rulers, the Romans.

In addition, they were spiritually helpless and without leadership. Their worship had been corrupted over the years by unfaithful priests who bought and sold their offices. Other leaders, such as the Pharisees, were unwilling to accept Jesus' teachings.

So the opportunity for a harvest was very real. And here, Jesus used the term "harvest" not as a reference to judgment day or the second coming, but rather to describe current realities. The situation was desperate, and the need was urgent.

And so Jesus sent the disciples out to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (10:8). Can you imagine their reaction when they heard that? For some time now Jesus himself had been doing this work, but now he told them to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

They might have thought "Say what?" "Are you kidding?" "You're the miracle worker, not us." Their actual response, however, was more respectful. If we read further in the Bible we see that they did as Jesus told them with the power he gave them (Mk. 6:12-13).

This was the beginning of their own ministry that was carried out so effectively when they were touched by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This mission of the twelve to go out and begin establishing communities of faith was the first step in establishing the church that has continued to the present day.

#### **IV.**

And the Church calls us today to minister in the same way. The mission field still is out there. There still are lost sheep and no shepherds, and in fact today's church probably has some leaders who are a lot like lost sheep masquerading as shepherds. That's another sermon.

Here I'm reminded of a "Peanuts" comic strip. Charlie Brown and Lucy were walking, and Lucy said, "I could be a great missionary." Charlie Brown asked why, and she said "I convinced a boy in school that my religion is better than his religion." Charlie Brown asked how she did that, and she answered, "I hit him over the head with my lunch box."

That Peanuts strip is an example of how not to do something, isn't it? We won't get very far by beating people over the heads with anything, whether it's a lunch box or the Bible. Jesus simply asks us, through the church, to help other people. We do that here, we did it in the aftermath of Katrina, and I know we will continue to do it.

With that background, I want to get specific about something I'm sure would be at the top of Jesus' list. It naturally follows from the message of today's Gospel, and it relates to our children.

Last month The Rev. Carol Stewart from the diocesan office visited us. She preached and gave a presentation between the services about a new diocesan initiative called Congregations for Children. It's a network of Mississippi Episcopal churches that are starting to work with other local agencies to improve the terrible plight of children in this state. At its meeting last month, your Vestry voted to become a member church in that network.

During her presentation Rev. Stewart said something that has remained with me to this day. She said the Mississippi Department of Corrections makes projections of future prison populations based on the number of children who cannot read by the time they get to the third

grade. There might be more to it, but there certainly is something wrong with that picture even if it's partially accurate.

I would ask us all to think about what we do or have done through the church to reach out to others. And I would like to suggest that here in Hancock County one of our most pressing needs is evident in the plight of some of our at-risk young children.

And I don't mean to diminish other ministries and other work we do here. It's important to help those in need and who exist on the margins of life for any reason. And to some extent, there are public and private programs working in those areas. But that's not the case for some of the children, kids who don't have a real chance in life, third graders who could be bound for prison.

St. Thomas has a ministry of helping at-risk children at Hancock Middle School. It's basically the result of Bobbie Stephens's work, who truly has a heart for these kids. As we become more involved in the diocesan network and become more active as a Congregation for Children, there will be additional opportunities to help these children, these lost sheep, who often have no shepherd of any kind, at home, at school, or anywhere else.

I know we will find support for that work here at St. Thomas. Talk to Bobbie, or any of our church members who teach or work in the elementary schools or with special education needs. And stay tuned on this station as well. As we get more involved with the diocesan network, we will get more information to you over the summer about the work we can do.

## V.

Before I conclude, I want to devote a minute to our children and young people at St. Thomas. I know I said at the beginning this would be a sermon about what we do outside the church rather than inside, so this will be a brief digression.

How is the harvest going at St. Thomas? Obviously, our Sunday Worship services are the first priority. That's why churches exist. And our acolytes are an integral part of that worship. Sunday School is our second priority. If we do not introduce our children to the Lord when they are young, it's less likely they will meet him when they are older. We are continuing our Sunday School program here during the summer even though many churches do not do that. Please think about whether you might be called to be a Sunday School teacher.

And then our junior and senior high kids are next. We call that the EYC Group, for "Episcopal Youth Community." Hopefully they have a foundation for their faith from Sunday School, but now they face the real problems of growing up and becoming adults. If you go back and look at the old Flower Guild room you will see that it's being transformed into a space for our young people. We're going to share it with the Flower Guild and call it the "PIT" for "Parishioners in Training." And we're working to develop an EYC program for St. Thomas this summer even though other Episcopal Churches in the area have ended their programs until September.

## VI.

So, here we are. Jesus said that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. The harvest always has been plentiful. It has ever been so. It was true then, and is true now. And today we emphasize the importance of our young people in that harvest.

And let us pray that the laborers will not be few. Let us pray that our work as shepherds with young people inside the church can taken out into the community where truly lost sheep are wandering. St. Thomas is called to do this work. Together we can do it. *Amen.*