

HARVEST TIME

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Matthew 9:35-10:8

In my sermon last week, I examined the story of God's call to Abram and Sarai. Later, they would become known as Abraham and Sarah. They were a couple in the sunset years of their lives when they received a call from God. The call instructed them to go to a land that God would direct them to. God made the promise that their descendants would create a great peoples and that the very name of Abram and Sarai would be a blessing for all of the families of the earth.

There was only one problem with God's plan, and that was that Abram and Sarai were both well along in years and they had never had children. How are they possibly going to have descendants when at age 75, Sarai, well past her childbearing years, has no children of her own?

As we know, the couple pulls up their tent pegs, gathers their belongings as well as their servants, and they migrate south until God instructs them to stop in the land of Canaan. They settle there. Eventually the couple has a child that they name Isaac. Isaac has a son Jacob who takes on the name Israel and has twelve sons of his own. Indeed, a great nation of descendants is given to Abram and Sarai. Because they answered God's call, they are blessed, and they become a blessing to all.

In that sermon, I suggested that when we are called by God that we should go. And that God may call us even in our senior years. As we learn with Abram and Sarai, God is never done with us. We are like the reserves; we may be called up to serve at any time.

Our reading for today is also about people being called. This time it is Jesus doing the calling and he is calling twelve men to be his disciples. He gives them power and authority to work alongside him in his ministry.

Our reading begins in Chapter 9 of Matthew's gospel where Matthew tells us that Jesus has been travelling through the cities and villages of Galilee. He has been teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. He has also been curing people of their diseases and illnesses.

We read that when Jesus looked out over the crowds that gathered to see him that he had compassion for the people. He recognized that they were *harassed and helpless*, that they were *like sheep without a shepherd*. These were people of faith and yet the leaders of their faith had left them. These people were looking for God while the religious leaders were serving God's Law. Jesus' message to these people was that the kingdom of God was indeed accessible to them. This is why they were

harassed and helpless. The religious leaders conveyed to them the message that only the so-called righteous could receive God's salvation. Jesus' message is that righteousness is determined by the heart not the rabbis. This is why the people felt out of sorts. They couldn't reconcile their faith with their heart.

Jesus explains to his disciples, *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few*. What he seems to be saying is, "look at all these people out here who are searching for God's salvation. There are so many of them but so few of us to help and guide them into God's kingdom. Let us pray to the Lord of the harvest to send more laborers into these fields."

We then read that Jesus calls his disciples together and invests them with the authority to perform acts of power—to cast out unclean spirits and cure every disease and every sickness. He gives them these 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*. In other words, when you are proclaiming the kingdom of God, start with the low-hanging fruit—the people of Israel who hunger for salvation and know what it is. Start there and work outward to the tougher sell to the Gentiles and Samaritans. The message for these people is this, *The kingdom of heaven has come near*. For those faithful children of Israel who thought that salvation was beyond them because they didn't donate enough to the temple, or because they had to work on the Sabbath, or because they missed making their burnt offering last month, or some other infraction of their religion, Jesus wants the disciples to assure them that their righteousness is for God to judge, not the priests.

In addition to this message about the kingdom, Jesus commands his disciples to *Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons*. The disciples were likely stunned that they had the power to perform these daunting miracles. But these acts are indeed signs of God's kingdom.

COUNCIL

Several months ago, I approached the church Session with a request—an unusual request. I told them that I was strongly considering running for political office—specifically a seat on Nashville's Metro Council. Courtney and I live just inside the county line. But I wanted their approval first. After all, my job is to serve this church and that comes first. If the Session thought that my being on Council would infringe upon my responsibilities here, I asked them to deny my request. We talked about this for a while. I then left the room and allowed them to discuss my proposal without me. The end result was that they approved my request. And for this I am thankful

So, most of you have become aware that I indeed running for office. The campaign got off to a slow start because of the state Assembly's ruling to cut the size of the Metro Council from 40 members to 20. I had to wait on the court ruling

before I could move forward. The courts granted an injunction and allowed for this election to proceed with the normal complement of 40 seats.

So, why am I running? The short answer is that I feel a calling to this position. For the first twelve years of my life, my father served in the Alabama legislature. Serving was part of our household's culture. Both parents have been involved in the civic arena. I have felt called to political office and finally the opportunity has come around. And now, I feel kind of like Abraham. At time when I should be planning my retirement (it's still a few years off), I'm embarking on something new.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples, *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few*. When I announced to my preaching colleagues that I was running, one of them said, "You should. You are always talking about politics." My wife had to remind me that not everyone is as wrapped up in politics as I am. I have had a number of people thank me for running, for being willing to put my neck out. That has been a surprise. I hadn't thought about it, but statistically, very few people run for office. Davidson County has over seven-hundred thousand residents, but only 80 are running for Council. That is one-one-hundredth of a percentage point. On the other hand, if you've been following this upcoming election, about 50% of the county is running for the office of mayor. But seriously, very few people want to run for office. When people ask me why I am running, the answer I have in my heart is that I feel called—called to serve in this manner. Given the structure of Nashville government, serving on Council is a part-time position that should not impose on my responsibilities here. In fact, I think it will make me better at being a pastor.

So, what does all this mean? Well, right now, I am running for office. I am building a campaign and I'm getting out to meet the voters. I have a treasurer, I have an intern, I have volunteers who put out yards sign, I have people who will host house parties, I have people who donate money, and I have lots of people who constantly give me advice. The election is August 3. It is exciting, and it is terrifying.

I also have three opponents—three men who want the same office that I am seeking. Only one of us will win.

I wouldn't do this if I didn't believe that it would also benefit our church. If I win, my being on Council as a pastor will be something of a novelty. And I will make sure that the media always mentions that I am the pastor of First Presbyterian in Lebanon.

Last week, while campaigning at the Old Hickory Farmers Market, I ran into two couples from Lebanon. I told them that I pastored this church and invited them to come visit. There will be lots more of those.

This congregation has a rich history of political service with our own Stratton Bone serving in the legislature for a number of years. David Howell informed me that his father once ran for County Commission in Wilson County many, many years ago. The Rev. Bob Malsack who worships with us when he is in town, told me that he served for ten years on the township council when he pastored a church in Michigan.

One of the things that has surprised me as I've been campaigning is how favorably I've been accepted as a pastor. To be honest, I kept this kind of quiet at first not sure how people would react. I didn't want them to think that I was going to smack them in the head with a Bible. But what I've discovered is that most people are not only accepting of my being a pastor but encouraging as well. Nearly everyone has at some point in time had a church connection. If elected, I hope that my visibility may inspire people to connect or re-connect with a church.

If elected, the duties of Council will include the normal tasks of planning and zoning, of maintaining infrastructure, of being the local representative of government to the residents of the district. One resident informed me that on occasion that he has called the current councilman about the beavers. Apparently, his condo backs up to a stream where beavers like to build a dam which floods his property. I'm not at all sure what a councilman is supposed to do about this, but I will find out. (I rather hope it involves dynamite.)

Aside from the normal and mundane, I believe a big issue before the Council in the next few years will be the subject of homelessness. Homelessness in Middle Tennessee is increasing. We have witnessed it ourselves.

Homelessness is not significant in my district, but there is a sizable encampment in Hermitage, which adjoins my district. A homeless encampment brings a lot of problems with it—trash, crime, drugs, prostitution, and more. Panhandling in the area becomes prevalent. People don't feel safe.

As a pastor, I have been directly and indirectly involved with homeless ministries for thirty years. But the work of these ministries is always just a bandaid. When we house a person for a night, it is a ministry of love and compassion, but it is just a bandaid. It is not a solution. That person will need a bandaid the next night and the next. Band aids are wonderful. They protect our wounds. But band aids don't attack the root causes of homelessness. As a member of Council, I will be in a position to do more, to craft legislation that can address the deeper issues such as mental health, addiction, and education. Or, as Jesus phrased it, as a council man, I will have the authority to *cast out demons*. That would be extraordinarily fulfilling.

For some in the community, the solution to the presence of unhoused people is to bulldoze their encampments. Push these people aside; arrest them if possible.

Jesus would look at them say that they were *harassed and helpless*. Get rid of the camp and get rid of the problem. But that is not a solution. That only forces the residents to relocate. From my conversations with my friend John Grant, the director of Compassionate Hands, if that Hermitage encampment is closed, it will force some of those people into Wilson County.

Finally, I look forward to exploring the intersection of faith and politics. I want to examine the question of is it possible for a Christian to proclaim the kingdom in the public square with faith and integrity? It must be, but I want to find out for myself, and I want to include you in the conversation.