June 14, 2026 Pentecost 3
Matthew 9-35 – 10:8 Pastor Jeff Laustsen

"A Community of Encouragement"

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

I have been asked repeatedly over the years if I have ever played basketball. Most people who ask this assume that because I am tall, I must also be athletically gifted; but sadly, this is not the case with me. I have often said that I am probably one of the worst athletes in the history of humanity; I have yet to find a sport in which I am even minimally gifted. It is not that I have not tried to become even an average athlete; over the years I have tried out for a variety of teams; this includes such diverse sports as basketball, football, soccer, track and field, and even bowling. But sadly, I failed at all these endeavors, until one day Coach Schneider took me aside, put his hand on my shoulder, and said the words that ended my athletic career: *"you know Jeff, we need spectators too!"*

At first, I was devastated by these words; but over time I saw the wisdom of the coach's statement. I became a regular spectator at my high school's games, especially as a member of the marching band. I have continued to be a spectator at sporting events in university and through following my favourite teams, and whenever a friend or colleague is competing in a sport, I always try to be present to cheer them on to victory. While I will never be a good athlete, I have been a decent spectator and fan of the teams I follow and support.

Being present in the stands or the audience is an important place for us to be in order to support and cheer on a person who is performing. Parents and grandparents will flock to dance recitals to support their children and grandchildren, and friends will attend a play in which one of their group is performing. We go to games to cheer on our neighbours when they are playing, and we pack stadiums to cheer on teams who are competing for championships. The support of people on the sidelines is so important that some teams refer to their fans as the "Twelfth Man," as important to their success as the eleven players on the field. I have learned over the years that Coach Schneider was correct; my high school teams need the support of the people in the stands to cheer them on to victory.

There are times when we are called as people of faith to cheer on those who are engaged in the field of mission into which our Lord calls us. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of the encouragement we receive from the communion of saints who are a source of inspiration and encouragement for this generation of God's holy people:

- "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." – Hebrews 12:1-2.
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Paul's letters are filled with words of encouragement that he entreats his readers to share with each other. He exhorts the Thessalonians to *"encourage one another and build up each other, as you are doing"* (1 Thessalonians 5:11), and offers a blessing to the Romans that *"the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (Romans 15:5-6). In his farewell discourse to his disciple, our Lord Jesus Christ encourages them to remember that *"I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"* (John 16:33). As our Lord called his first disciples to be a community of encouragement, so is the Church in every generation called to be a community that loves one another, supports one another, and encourages one another in the various tasks we are called to undertake in the name of our Lord and Saviour:

- "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together.*

The call to encourage one another does not mean that Christian discipleship is merely a spectator sport; it is a life in which each of us is called to use our various gifts so that we might *"equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:12). This call to be engaged in the work of ministry is heard in today's Gospel lesson, where Jesus invites his disciples to participate in the ministry in which he has been engaged: *"Then Jesus 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." (Matthew 9:35). Jesus has been presented throughout his Gospel as the Messiah in both word and deed, and this will be the mark of those who will be empowered to continue his mission:

- "These verses capture the heart of discipleship: responding to the needs of the people, relying on God's provision, and carrying forth the work of healing and restoration. To do this, Jesus' disciples need to imitate their Lord. This passage challenges us to see discipleship not as passive believe but as active participation in the work of restoration." – Danny Zacharias.

Matthew reports that *"when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* (9:36). The phrase "sheep without a shepherd" was common in the Old Testament in describing the failure of God's shepherd/kings to care for the people entrusted to them by God (*"I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd"* – 1 Kings 22:17). Matthew uses the phrase to describe the uncommitted masses of Israel who are potential disciples, but who are in danger of being misled by their leaders. Matthew considers Jesus to be the true shepherd who has compassion for the harassed and helpless flock (*"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Juday; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."* – 2:6; Micah 5:2). Jesus has compassion for these people that is not abstract; *"it moves him to action. He sees their suffering, their lostness, and recognizes their need for leadership and care.* (Zacharias).

Recognizing this need, Jesus proclaims to his disciples that *"the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send our labourers into his harvest."* (9:37-38). Throughout the Bible, "harvest" is a frequent symbol for judgment, a time to *"put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great"* (Joel 3:13), and when John the Baptist calls upon the crowds to prepare for the day when *"his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* (Matthew 3:12). While Jesus uses this harvest imagery in his address to his disciples, this ingathering will not be for the sake of judgment but redemption; the disciples' mission will be to continue Jesus' work of gathering people into his Kingdom. As such, it is God's act, though involving human workers rather than angels as God's agents. Thus, the disciples are instructed to pray for the God of the harvest to send out labourers into this harvest. While the crowds have expressed great enthusiasm in response to Jesus' teachings (*"Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority,*

and not as their scribes." – 7:28-29), but there were no leaders to reap the spiritual harvest for the Messiah. Since many of the religious leaders of the people openly opposed Jesus, he instructs his disciples to pray for new leaders to be raised up who the Lord could send out into this harvest. The response to this prayer will be the mission of the disciples who will be sent out into the mission field as apostles, who *"in this context are represented as an expression of the divine compassion for the needy people of God, and as participants in the Messiah's eschatological work … The disciples' mission is not voluntary activity initiated by them; rather, they are chosen, authorized, and sent by God through Christ."* (M. Eugene Boring).

Immediately after he charges his disciples to pray for labourers to be sent into the harvest of the Kingdom, Jesus commissions them for this work: *"Then 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). As apostles, Jesus' mission will continue in the work they continue as they are given the authority to speak and act in Jesus' name, to continue doing the same deeds of power as Jesus himself has done. Matthew provides a list of the Twelve, some of whom we have previously met in the Gospel:

- "And he said to [Simon and Andrew], 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people' … he called [James and John]. Immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him." – 4:19-22.
- "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him." – 9:9.

While Matthew does not report on the call of the other apostles, there is an account in the Gospel of John of the calling of Philip and Bartholomew, the latter of whom is referred to in the Fourth Gospel as Nathaniel (John 1:43:51). Matthew ends his list of the Twelve with Judas Iscariot, adding that he would be *"the one who betrayed him"* (10:4). The number twelve is significant in this commissioning of apostles, as it recalls the twelve tribes of Israel who would be the means through which God would bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:3). Jesus gives these twelve apostles a share of his own authority, commissioning them to do what he has been doing, for *"an apostle participates in the authority of the one who sends him."* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

As apostles who have been chosen and commissioned to continue Jesus' mission of gathering people into the Kingdom, he now sends them out with specific instructions. First, they are 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" (10:5-6). This does not mean that the Kingdom will not include all people, including Gentiles and Samaritans; after his resurrection, Jesus will commission these same apostles to *"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (28:19). What it means is that as the disciples are to function with the authority of Jesus, they are charged to first go to the "lost sheep of Israel" as has Jesus – to proclaim the same message, to perform the same healings, exorcisms, and even raising the dead. The disciples are sent exclusively to Israel corresponding to the mission of Jesus, who *"has 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). Jesus' directive is to go only to Israel because *"it is Israel who is in need of medicine and strength to live into their divine role."* (Zacharias). They are to perform a sort of spiritual triage, caring for those who are most in need of healing so that they might fulfill God's commission of his people to be the ones through whom all people might be restored into the fullness of God's presence.

As they are sent to the people of Israel, the apostles are to proclaim the same message that was first proclaimed by Jesus and John the Baptist: *"The kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (3:1, 4:17). Jesus not only authorizes his apostles, *"but also commands them to bring the power of the kingdom to bear on the needs of the sick, lepers, and those afflicted by demons."* (Mitch and Sri). It continues the mission of Jesus to restore all people to wholeness both physical and social; it is a work that is *"not confined to Jesus alone; it is entrusted to his followers."* (Zacharias).

The call to discipleship was a call for these followers to not only watch and listen to our Lord but to go forth and continue his mission of proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven and offering signs of that kingdom through the miracles that they would perform in Jesus' name. Each of them would prove to live out their call in different ways, but none of them would fulfill this call by being mere spectators or by staying on the sidelines while others engaged in the work of ministry. At the heart of discipleship it is to follow Jesus' example of loving others in both word and deed, in being a servant of all, in seeing in each person a beloved child for whom our Lord died and rose again. It meant knowing that each of them had a gift that was different from others, but which was essential to use in order that the body of Christ might be built up, and the mission of Christ accomplished. It was the work of the community in which each disciple knew that their gifts were essential to be used so that they might truly be the Church which is the Body of Christ:

- "But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift … The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." – Ephesians 4:7, 11-13.

All who are called by Christ to be disciples are entrusted with diverse gifts that must be used for the purpose our Lord intends: to build up the body of Christ, to advance the mission of Christ' Church, and to accomplish God's Will for all God's people. The Church is a community of the gifted that shares its gifts freely with others as Christ shares the gift of God's steadfast love freely with us. As we have been blessed by our Lord, we are called to be a blessing to others so that our gifts may be used for the purpose of shining the love of Christ's love before all people.

- "Community is like a large mosaic. Each little piece seems so insignificant. One piece is bright red, another cold blue or dull green, another warm purple, another sharp yellow, another shining gold … When, however, all these little stones are brought together in one big mosaic portraying the face of Christ, who would ever question the importance of any one of them? If one of them, even the least spectacular one, is missing, the face is incomplete. Together in the one mosaic, each little stone is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to the glory of God. That's community, a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world." – Henri Nouwen.

I did take Coach Schneider's recommendation to heart as I became a spectator at many games during my high school years, but I did eventually find my way onto the football field – as a member of the marching band, playing at halftime when the team was in the locker room. But something interesting happened in the course of the year: the band would practice on the field every Wednesday night under the lights. At first, we had a few spectators, but then the football team and many other members of the high school community began lining the sidelines to cheer us on as we cheered them on during their games. We became a community that learned to support one another when we were on the field and when we were on the sidelines; we became a community of encouragement that our Lord calls the Church to be in fulfilling our call to discipleship in this generation. We all have diverse gifts that will call us onto the field of discipleship at various times; at other times, we will be called to be that "cloud of witnesses" that cheers each other on in our various ministries as we work together to fulfill God's call for us as Christ's church in this time and place. We do indeed need spectators in the Church so that we might fulfill our mission to serve

“in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve, and spread Christ’s liberating word.”

Amen.