

**October 19, 2003
Pentecost 19
Mission Festival**

"Look at the Fields Ripe for the Harvest"

JOHN 4:27-38

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.³¹ Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."³³ Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?"³⁴ "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.³⁶ Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.³⁷ Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true.³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."

When I was a child, I stood next to my dad, looking over a field of oats that was ready to be harvested. My dad said that he had never seen a field of oats as tall as it was that year, with more grain in the heads, and almost free of weeds. "Tomorrow, we will start harvesting the grain," he said. That night there was a terrible storm, with heavy rain and high winds. The power of that storm flattened the grain to the ground, knocked out grain from the heads, and made it very difficult to harvest.

In the words just read to you we see Jesus standing next to his disciples, pointing to a large group of people coming to see him. With their off-white robes waving in the wind and reflecting the sunlight, they almost looked like a field of wheat ready to be harvested. Jesus told them, "Open your eyes and look at the fields. They are ripe for the harvest."

Look at the fields ripe for the harvest. That must have been the reaction of two pastors from Michigan who explored the field in Africa over 50 years ago. They reported to our national church body that we needed to do mission work in Africa because it was a field ripe for the harvest. This past summer a man from Africa, the president of our Lutheran Church in Central Africa, had the closing devotion for our national church convention. He praised God's grace and thanked our people for bringing the gospel to his people.

As we think of Africa this morning as a field that has been ripe for the harvest, we need to ask ourselves the question, "What about the State of California, or the Central Coast where we are living?" As we look across the population boom in our state and in our Central Coast do we not see a field ripe for the harvest? Let's listen to the words of Jesus this morning, spoken not just to the disciples but also to each of us, **"Look at the Fields Ripe for the Harvest."**

1) Look at the opportunity

If we want to be better missionaries to the world and to our community then we need to look at the opportunities the way Jesus saw them. Our text says, "Just then his disciple returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'" Jesus was talking to a woman, a Samaritan woman, a woman who was infamous for having five husbands and living with a man who was not her husband. Normally the Jews made a special effort to go around the land of the Samaritans because they despised them. Jesus went through their country, looking for an opportunity to tell someone that he was the Messiah. Men in those days did not talk to women. One rabbi wrote, "Each time a man prolongs conversation with a woman he causes evil to himself." Another rabbi wrote, "Let no man talk with a woman in the street, not with his own wife." Jesus looked at people differently. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd regardless of their gender, or nationality or color of skin.

Remember how Jesus stopped at the Jacob's famous well and asked her for a drink of water. Then he piqued her interest by telling her he had a water far better than the water that came into the well, water that could quench her thirst forever. She confessed her need for help and forgiveness by saying, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus said, "I who speak to you am he." So filled with joy was this woman that our text says that she left her water pot and told the people in her town, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" Her message hit home with the people and they started coming toward Jesus and the disciples in large numbers. It was an unbelievable opportunity for Jesus the shepherd to seek more lost sheep and bring them into his kingdom. The fields were ripe for the harvest.

Did the disciples see what Jesus saw? No, they did not. They were more concerned that Jesus might have something to eat. That is why they urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." At this point in time, if Jesus stomach was growling and he was hungry, and he had not eaten all day, he did not feel it. He was totally wrapped up in the joy of the moment, the opportunity to teach these Samaritans about the plan that could rescue them from spending an eternity in hell. He told his disciples "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and finish his work." There is a time for every purpose under heaven. There is a time to worry about eating, and working, and buying a home or a car, and there is a time to be more concerned about taking advantage of a golden opportunity that comes your way to point someone to Jesus. Ask yourself the personal question, "Are the concerns that I have in my life right now looming up so large that I cannot see the opportunities to help someone who needs to know about Jesus?"

The pastors who went to Africa saw mission fields with tremendous opportunity, fields ripe for the harvest. As the people started coming to hear the word, they began to tell their friends. I recall reading about one missionary who road his bicycle into the bush and arrived at the church after it was dark. He went into the dark church and all he had to read from was a light bulb hanging from the ceiling. After teaching the lesson that prepared them for communicant membership, he went outside and saw over 100 people streaming out of the church into the moonlit night.

Dear members of our Star. Why has the Lord left you here on this earth? Look again at those Samaritans coming out of their village to be with Jesus. The Lord leaves us here to

take advantage of opportunities to let people know what Jesus has done to rescue them from the eternal punishment. A missionary was talking to an Apache Indian about Jesus. He asked the man if he knew what Jesus had done for him? Without speaking the man took some grass and put it into a ring. Then he placed a caterpillar in the middle of the grass circle, and lit the circle on fire. As the worm started to squirm, he reached in and rescued it before it could be harmed. Hell is real. A holy and righteous God by his very nature must punish people for falling short of his glory. In his love, our God has given us his Son to rescue us. Romans 3 says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Then the verse goes on to say, "And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Romans 10 tells us, "How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?"

There is urgency to getting this message out to people. The field is ripe for the harvest, and the time to complete the harvesting is short.

2) Look at the urgency

The time for Jesus to be alone with these Samaritans was short. The next day he would move on to another village. The disciples did not see the urgency of the moment. They did not see their important role in talking to these people, and making them welcome, and doing their part to teach them about Jesus as they came to him in large numbers. That is why Jesus tells them, "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields. They are ripe for the harvest.'" When farmers plant grain in the ground it takes several months for it to grow and ripen. Jesus told the disciples, "Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may be glad together. Imagine a situation where the sower plants the seed in the field, and immediately the grain shoots up and ripens and the reaper follows after him. If things happen that fast, then there is no time to worry about eating, or sleeping, or building church buildings, or mowing the lawn or doing the dishes.

It happened several years ago in Grover Beach. A baby was choking on something it had swallowed. The mother frantically screamed to her neighbor for help. She had been trained in CPR. She placed the baby on its stomach, held it in her arm, and then gave swift thump on the back. The child started breathing again. Think of the joy of rescuing that child, and knowing you were used to save a human life. What if the neighbor said, "I cannot come over now, because I am too busy washing dishes? What if she said, "I cannot help you, because my favorite program is on television?"

What if the WELS said to the people in Africa who were looking for missionaries to help them during those years of tremendous growth, "Well, we have no money to send you missionaries or help you build your chapels in the bush with mud walls and tin roofs, because we have to take care of ourselves first." If the fields are ripe for the harvest, and things are happening so fast that the sower and reaper rejoice together, then everything must be done to take advantage of the opportunity when it knocks.

There is an amazing prophecy in the book of Amos that says, "The days are coming when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman, and the planter by the one treading the grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills." There will be

times in the history of the Christian church were the Lord will open up doors to proclaim his word, and things will happen so fast it seems like the planter and reaper are rejoicing together.

What if the times are slow? What if the opportunities do not seem as great as they once were in other times of history or the history of your life? Then its time to look at the field, not just our tiny little acre or the kernels of grain we may be harvesting in our lives. If the Lord only gives you one opportunity in your lifetime to talk to someone about Jesus, then rejoice in that opportunity, and rejoice in the opportunity that he is giving to others. Lift up your eyes and look beyond your tiny little spot and see the whole field. It may be that you are planting seed that others might harvest, or perhaps you will harvest where others have planted as Jesus said, "I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."

The Lord wants us to pray for opportunities to plant the seed in the lives of people. Is it selfish to pray ask the Lord for part of the action in these last days? Hardly. As Jesus said, "Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life." We can even pray, "Lord, lift me eyes to the fields that are ripe for the harvest, and let me find joy in bringing in that harvest every day of my life, whatever the results might be." Amen.