



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick**

**2ns Sunday after Pentecost**

**Sermon Title: "Labors of Love"**

**Gospel Text: Matthew 9:35-10:8**

When I was a little girl, I couldn't wait to learn how to ride a "Big girl" bike, without training wheels. I had practiced and practiced how to balance and was ready. I think I was even more ready than my Mom. The training wheels were off and as I was pedaling she was holding onto the seat of my bike awkwardly trotting behind me, trying to keep me safe. I remember turning and yelling at her to PLEASE LET GO! I was more than ready to soar on my own. But, the exact opposite was true when it came to learning how to swim. I was terrified of feeling so unsupported and ill equipped in the water. Add to that one really insensitive swimming instructor of the "throw 'em in the deep end" variety and I was convinced I would never do that again. Besides I wasn't the only person who couldn't swim. But then I went to camp and swimming was a part of it. We were supposed to take a swimming test and I just knew people would be critical. So every time it was time to go the pool, while everyone else went to the pool, I went to the bathhouse and hid. I was tormented by my inadequacy. I didn't want to be harassed, but I also felt really helpless. Among the other girls in the tent, I was "that baby who can't swim." One tried to push me in. Another tried to get me to just admit in front of all the others that I couldn't do it.

Why could I harness all that enthusiasm and bravery for learning how to ride a bike but not for swimming? I think I felt more in control of the bike than the water. On the bike I had things to hold onto, and to steer. In the water, it seemed like all I had was myself.

Finally, the camp swim teacher caught up with me and was wise enough to know that telling me I was awfully old to not be able to swim, or that I just needed to try harder would not work. Instead, she told me she had not learned to swim until she was an adult. Her heart met me where I was in compassion. She met me where I struggled and struggled with me, alongside me. She wasn't just sympathetic. She cared enough not only to help me, but to not let me stay where I was. The water was just as deep, and I was still my awkward self, but she moved me to see that my present was not the only thing that was possible. She took days of very slowly

guiding me just to get me to the point where I could float. Hours of laborious and time consuming work for her on my behalf. For me, it was liberating to no longer bear the weight of being “that kid who can’t swim.” Frankly, I imagine it may have been liberating for her too to remember she now lived beyond a time when she struggled under the weight of being judged by others.

We can all fall into the trap of living in a narrow and negative view of ourselves, and of God, and of the world around us.

The story goes that someone once asked an old monk, “How do I get over the habit of judging people?” he answered, “when I was your age, I was wondering where was the best place to pray, so I asked Jesus. His answer was, “Why don’t you go into the heart of my Father?” So I did and all these years that’s where I’ve prayed. Now I see everyone as my own child. How can I judge anyone?”<sup>1</sup>

The heart of the Father is what Jesus reveals in the gospel. Each of the people in the crowd Jesus sees are in some way feeling abandoned, harassed and helpless. Those sheep without a shepherd, scattered and struggling. “That blind guy,” “that girl who can’t walk,” “that contagious leper,” “that person possessed” are the ways they have been known in the world.

Struggling in a “sink or swim” world. Where people have spent far more time judging than caring for others. Jesus comes into this world proclaiming good news, but it’s more- in compassion his heart meets theirs to draw them into God’s new reality. He joins them in their struggles to be seen and loved and valued and made whole.

But, there are so many people- the harvest is plentiful. People whose lives had withered; people who long for and need to be healed; who deserve to be liberated and made whole from years of having to swim in a place that would just as soon drown them. The harvest is plentiful. But the laborers are few.

As Jesus’s heart goes out to them, these tasks are far harder than helping a non-swimmer learn to swim. These are the labors of love- Curing illness, rising above death, cleansing contagion, casting out evil. These are not

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<sup>1</sup> Theophane the Monk, *Tales of a Magic Monastery*, p. 19

tasks of a moment they are tasks of serious engagement. And Jesus calls the twelve to it.

He tells them to pray that the Lord will send more laborers for this harvest. Then the very next act he undertakes is to send them before they have those extra laborers even show up. Not only that, he will go on to tell them, don't take anything. What you need comes from beyond you.

Take no money, no clothes, no protection, none of the props you depend upon to make your way in the world. That's how he sent them out. Actually the best interpretation is that he "thrusts them out" into the world. Like the mama bird nudges babies out of the nest to test their wings.

It's just them, surrounded by others who Jesus has told them will mock them, or worse, and tasks that seem so big. Too big to be mastered. It would be easy to just hide and know that other people have too. Because "I don't have what it takes to deal with this, Jesus. It's just too big."

Friends, having compassion for the crowds is not for the faint of heart. It looks chaotic and frantic. Jesus stands with the crowds to gather them and us to the heart of the Father whose compassion enacts what true justice looks like for everyone needing to be cured, and healed, made whole, and liberated. Remember that Jesus has empowered us for this holy work.

Jesus acknowledges there is plenty to do, but pushes on, "Ask the Lord to help you, but do the work."

I am not sure they or we always remember that Jesus is our fellow laborer. But I believe that they and we, when sent as Jesus calls us to be- to preach and teach and heal and change lives, will suddenly experience that that preaching and teaching and healing wasn't just for those in the crowd. We too will experience it in all those acts of love that make us "we the disciples."

It can be tempting to think that we should just wait for more people or information or supports in the world. But Jesus is thrusting us out into the world now to bring more than sympathy. To bring our hearts, to bring our faith and to bring our labor as we labor alongside others who struggle. To suffer together for a world that is more expansive than our current reality. To bear God's creating and redeeming word into all the world. To proclaim God's love that even when you think everyone else has given up on you, God will not let you sink.

That's the good news we hear, and are given, and it's the good news we bear into the world. Remember Jesus reminds each one of us:

"I love you. I love my world. I love you so much no matter who and how you are. I also love everyone so much I can't let you stay where you are. Because I want more for my world.

The world needs me. I send you. But remember we're in this labor of love together."