

Come, Labor On
Matthew 9:35-10:1

On the Today show the other day, they did a piece on phobias and how to deal with them. I listened attentively for any tips, but my particular phobia wasn't covered – I freak out driving over bridges, something I've actually talked about in a previous sermon. I fear there's not much about me I haven't talked about in a sermon at some point. Anyway, they didn't cover mine, but they did run down the top five, and along with spiders and flying was, of course, agoraphobia, fear of being trapped inescapably in a crowd of folks.

This, it strikes me, is not an unreasonable fear. Anyone who's been in the midst of a swarming crowd knows that it can be scary as heck. Whether it's a crazy amount of people pushing their way into a football game, or the pit, as it's called, right down in front of the stage at a Green Day concert which my insane husband talked me into, people all around you, even people just having fun, can give you the heebie-jeebies.

If you travel to India, which a bunch of us have been lucky enough to do, heebie-jeebies are pretty easy to come by. On my first trip, my itinerary included taking a train from a rural area to the big city of Hyderabad. Some Indian friends, a couple young men, drove me to the train station. "Thanks, guys!" I said, and hopped out of the car. "What are you doing?" they yelled. "What do you mean, what am I doing?" I said, "the train's due in five minutes, I'm going to go wait on the platform." "You don't want to do that," they said, "get back in the car. When you see the train, then you get out." "That makes no sense," I argued. "I don't want to miss the train. I should wait on the platform." "Trust us," they said. "Get back in the car." So I did. Waited for five minutes to go by, and then hopped out of the car again. "I'm heading over," I said. "Get back in the car!" they said. "You guys are crazy," I said, "there's one train a day and I'm about to miss it."

And I stubbornly marched up to the train platform. Whereupon every single person in the train station, or, as far as I could tell, within five miles of the train station came running over to check out the crazy American woman in a saree standing by herself on the train station. People pressed in on every side, I was the epicenter of a teeming mass of humanity, surrounded by people who were curious, or seeking money, or practicing English, or all three at once. The personal space bubble? Not a concept. I suddenly sensed what it must be like to be a tube of toothpaste, squished right out of existence. Panic began to set in. Could someone be *curiositied* to death? It seemed I was about to find out. Just then my Indian buddies managed to squeeze their way through the

throng, grab me both arms and haul me back to the car. My saree was coming unwrapped, and my hair was every which way, and I was still seeing scenes from my life float by in front of my eyes. My friends, on the other hand, were laughing hysterically. When they finally stopped giggling, they said “So, still want to wait on the platform?” “Kinda liking the view from the car,” I said, and there I stayed until the train arrived... 90 minutes later.

A few years later, I was in the midst of a very different crowd in India, and giggles were a little harder to come by. It was a month after the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and we were on the most beautiful beach I’ve ever seen, in the midst of a village that had been devastated. And that day, our task was to hand out bags of rice, and those who pressed in on us that day were not idly curious, but hungry, truly hungry. We had enough rice for that one village, but the word got out to neighboring villages that there was food to be had, and people began to come from all around, and we had to explain that we had given it all away already. And there were tears and there was anger and darkness was falling, and our van was surrounded, and we were heartbroken and we were also frightened. In the midst of it all, a good and gentle man named TL Reddy, who has been our mission partner in India since that day, stood in the midst of the people and spoke to them lovingly, assured them that more help would be coming, and unlike me, never let a flicker of fear cross his face. I’ve never forgotten that moment.

I thought of all this as I read the story for today, because it is a crowd story. And at the center of this particular crowd is a man named Jesus, who had, the story said, been traveling from village to village to city to city healing the hurting, and proclaiming love. And the crowds had gathered, swarming, masses of people, curious, needy, hungering, desperate for everything he was offering – healing, new life, hope – finally, hope.

And surely it was frightening for him – it had gone from a handful of people coming to him to great crowds. Surely it would be frightening, wouldn’t it? But that’s not what it says. “When he saw the crowds,” the story says, “Jesus had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” He was overwhelmed, yes, but not by fear – by love. He was shaken, yes, but not by their number – only by the depth of their need. And what he says to his disciples then is not “we better get out of here,” or “hey, guys, back to Galilee for us.” He says, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” He is saying “there is an abundance before me, an abundance of good that needs to be done, and I, I need more help.”

So this is how he gets it. The last verse that Lori read to you. “And so,” it says, “Jesus summoned his disciples and gave them authority to cure every disease and every sickness.” Everything that Jesus could do, he gave them the power to do, too. His healing touch – he gave it to them to use. His capacity for love – he gave it to them to use. His ability to see someone’s hunger and to feed their soul – Jesus gave that to his followers. And he sent them out. He sent them out to love, to feed, to touch, to heal. “The harvest is plentiful,” said Jesus, “there is so much good that needs to be done and you’re going to do it with me.”

The hymn we sang at the beginning of this service is one of my favorites. I sang it as a child in the church I grew up in, a church which, like ours, cared deeply for the hurting cared deeply for those who hungered.

“Come, Labor on,” the congregation would sing, “who dares stand idle on the harvest plain? While all around us waves the golden grain, and to each servant does the Master say, “ go work today”.

It was a song written a hundred and fifty years ago by a young Scottish woman, a woman who believed passionately in the importance of caring for the hurting and the lost, for the hungering. A woman of faith who knew that the harvest was still as great as in Jesus’ time, that all around us were opportunities to love, waiting for us, all around us was good that needed to be done, a harvest of caring. And by writing this song for churches to sing, she was making her statement about what she believed churches were to be doing.

We believe the same. We believe that we are here, here in Greenfield Hill Church, to be reminded of the love yet to be given, the good needing to be done. We believe that we are here, we exist, because Jesus is still saying to us, his disciples of today, “the harvest is plentiful – the laborers are few – I need you.” And we come here to receive the same gifts from Christ that those first disciples received from him – the gift of his love to be shared with others, the gift of his healing, to be offered to others, the gift of his hope, to be given to others. He made those first disciples to be his own hands and heart – and now, today, he has no other hands or heart in this world but us. The harvest is plentiful. We are the laborers he calls.

I want to close by sharing a little story with you about a young woman in this church, a junior in college, who grew up in this church, Confirmand, youth grouper, Junior Deacon, Appalachia worker. Olivia Balsinger is up at U.Conn right now, back for her third year, and is I’m sure being a very normal college kid right now – (in fact, I believe it’s sorority rush!). But this past summer was

anything but normal. Olivia went to Guatemala, and for the first part of her visit, thanks to Facebook, I saw lots of pictures of gorgeous scenery and of the other college students on the trip, enjoying the country, exploring, having fun. But then I started seeing different pictures, pictures of kids in tremendous poverty, pictures of kids in a home, it seemed a school or an orphanage of some sort. And then Olivia sent us a link to a Youtube video. Please share this around, she wrote to us, I'm trying to help these children. Here's what had happened. In the midst of this trip, a trip designed to connect business students to a business project in Guatemala. Olivia had wandered off and found a harvest of need, a bounty of good waiting to be done. This is how she described it to me.

*We were in Nebaj, Guatemala which is a really rural village,
and I heard about this school outside the village,
for children with special needs.*

I wanted to see it, so i left my group,

*I took a tuktuk, which is a guatemalan taxi, by myself out to the school
and I spent the morning just playing basketball and reading with them
I fell in love with them.*

*and with this school, a school that was helping kids who were born with 2
disadvantages,*

not only born into poverty but with special needs too.

*I visited the house of one of these students, i walked him home because his mom
never came to pick him up, and it was amazing ...*

*i plan on visiting again because honestly this school was one of the most
touching places i have ever seen with so much hope and spirit ...*

*I just wish "luckier" people brought up without these strikes against them could
just witness this.ⁱ*

Olivia was raised by her parents, John and Holly, to be a loving person – but I also like to think that growing up in this church might have had something to do with creating a young woman who decided to wander off from her crowd and look for a place where she was needed, who listened and heard a voice saying “the harvest is plentiful, come labor on,” and who went and found a bunch of kids who were hungering for her love and who got it. Talk about being swarmed by a crowd – you should see the pictures of Olivia immersed in a crowd of beaming children in the middle of really nowhere, Guatemala. The harvest is plentiful; and Olivia this summer chose to be one of Christ’s laborers. I’m proud of her.

The harvest is plentiful.

We are the laborers Christ calls.
On this Labor Day weekend
we remember this.
Come, Labor On.
Amen.

ⁱ Paraphrased from online conversation with Olivia!