

Get to work!
Rev. Alida Ward
Matthew 9:35-38

If you were here a few Sundays ago,
 you may remember that for my children's message, I proudly showed them the zucchini that I had
 grown in my vegetable garden this year.
 I explained to them that I had never had a vegetable garden before,
 which is why I was so very pleased with myself.

As it turned out, that one zucchini was the *only* zucchini that grew in my garden this year.
 Eight zucchini plants started from seed inside back in April,
 a raised bed garden that Andres and I put together in the back yard in June,
 garden soil hauled home in the minivan from Home Depot,
 eight plants carefully placed into said soil,
 and in August, one zucchini.
 All told, that was one expensive zucchini.

I obviously did something wrong.
 Everyone else I know with gardens complains about having zucchini coming out their ears,
 more zucchini than they know what to do with.
 All over Facebook, friends and relatives were posting pictures of the bounty of their gardens.
 Everyone in church three weeks ago witnessed the full bounty of **my** garden.
 That was it.

I should have paid more attention to my grandmother.
 That was my repeated lament to David.
 I should have paid more attention to how my grandmother gardened.
 My grandmother, whose home stood on a couple acres in the middle of Charlottesville, Virginia,
 had a massive vegetable garden.
 Corn, tomatoes, beans, zucchini for sure, and greens: collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens,
 kale.
 The job of us grandkids was to weed, and to harvest --
 long hours in the hot Virginia sun,
 pulling up the weeds, and picking the beans and the greens and the zucchini off those scratchy stems.
 Those were our dinners all summer long.
 I should have paid more attention --
 that woman knew what she was doing.

I think of her whenever I hear the passage Adam just read to you.
 The harvest is plentiful, Jesus says to his disciples.
 What I need, he says, is people to work the field.
 All around us, he says, are fields ripe for the picking,
 but I need more help.
 Pray, he says to them, for God to send more laborers.
 Pray, he says, for God to give me more people willing to get to work.

But of course, it wasn't zucchini that was making him talk like this,

wasn't fields of mustard greens he was gazing upon.
 What he was looking at was *people* --
 lots and lots of people streaming toward him with their needs,
 their hurts, their longings.
 What he was looking at was fields full of people,
 surrounding him everywhere he looked,
 and every one of them eager to hear God's good news,
 desperate to feel the touch of God's love.
 And to the disciples, Jesus said,
 we need more people to get to work.
 We need more laborers to do the work of love,
 to help me bring healing,
 to help me listen and care and touch.
 Pray, he said, to his disciples, pray for more laborers
 for this harvest of hope.

And we, we are those laborers,
 we are the ones that Jesus counts on to do his work.
 The first hymn we sang is one that I grew up singing in the church of my childhood,
 a church that believed very strongly in putting your faith into action.
 It's a hymn based on this very passage.
 Come, labor on, it says,
 who dares stand idle on the harvest plain --
 Come, labor on --
 "To each person does the master say
 "Go work today.""

In other words, the hymn says,
 get off your behinds and do something.
 Get to work. The fields are full,
 the work is calling.
 Your grandmother needs you to go pick the veggies,
 Christ needs you to get out there and help.
 Come, labor on.

So what's the work to be done?

We **know** the work to be done.
 We know what's in those fields.
 We know that there is need upon need ...
 that there are wrongs that need righting,
 that there is hatred that needs to end.
 We know that there is loneliness that needs company,
 that there is suffering that needs healing.
 We know that there are children who are hungry,
 refugees without shelter,
 hurt that needs a cure.
 Get to work, says Christ.

Or, in the words of the hymn:
Come, Labor on.

Well, I could stop the sermon right there --
which would make it one of the shortest sermons ever preached up here,
and also, frankly, one of the more depressing ones.
The world is full of trouble, go fix it, Amen.

Which would leave all of us feeling pretty much the same way I always felt
when my grandmother said *Alida, get off the couch and go pick collard greens.*
That feeling of "*Ugh, do I have to?*"
And really, why would anyone keep coming to church
if all you heard from up here was
the world is full of woe -- which you already know --
now get to work.

What that hymn doesn't capture is the joy.
What Jesus knew, what anyone who works for Jesus knows,
is that to labor for the kingdom is to find our deepest joy.
What '*come labor on*' doesn't tell you
is that it is in **doing** Christ's work, side by side with him in God's fields
that our own hope takes root and our own gladness blossoms.
The first time I got this, really got this,
was on my first trip to India, back in 1999.
It was pretty overwhelming being there.
The noise, the people, the traffic, the tastes,
everything seemed too much,
but most of all, it was the poverty -- the children, the faces, the need,
the outstretched hands all the time, all the time.
And I was with, all the time, I was with good people whose every moment
was spent being in the midst of all that poverty, all that need,
working in God's field.

And I thought, they must be overwhelmed, too, surely.
But they didn't seem to be. In fact, they seemed energized.
And the day that really came home to me was the day I found myself in a meeting of all the people we,
this church, were supporting --
pastors from rural villages, and the heads of the orphanages,
and the guy running a feeding center,
and they were all talking animatedly, and they kept using a word, '*santosh*'.
And given what they were talking about, I figured this word must mean
poverty or challenge or maybe even money, the money they needed.
And I finally asked someone. What is this '*Santosh*' I keep hearing, what does that word mean?
Joy, they said, it means joy.
They're expressing their joy for all that God is doing,
for all that God is doing through them.
Santosh means joy.

I've never forgotten that.

And each year, when I sit down with the group that's joining me on the mission trip to India -- something you can join me for in December, by the way --

when I sit down with them, I tell them:

yes, you'll be in the midst of incredible need,

but you'll also be in the presence of hope.

Because you'll be with the ones who are doing Christ's work,

and you'll be working alongside them.

And in that is tremendous joy.

Christ knew this about us.

That it is when we are not *doing* that the needs of the world seem too much.

That when we just look out and contemplate what **is**

that we are overwhelmed.

He knew that it is in the work that we find our joy.

By sending us out into a world with so much for us to do,

he offers us the chance to find our hope, to find our joy.

It isn't just 'get to work' that Jesus says,

it isn't just 'do something',

it's 'get to work with me,'

'do something with me',

and in that is profound joy.

I don't mean that you have to move to India,

or give up your day job to run a shelter

though I won't stop you if you do either of those things.

In whatever life you are living now, there is room to be at work with Christ;

in whatever work you are doing now, there is room to be at work for Christ.

Wherever and whoever you are, you can be a laborer for Jesus.

You can be watching out for the hurting,

keeping company with the lonely,

speaking out for the oppressed,

standing tall for justice,

opening your mouth to say what needs to be said.

All of that is to be at work with Jesus,

all of that is to be one of those he called to the harvest.

There is so much to be done, so many to be loved, so much to be made right,

and you can do that in ways big and small every single day.

In just a few moments I'm going to ask David to come up here and lead us in the close of our worship today,

a closing that we've chosen to dedicate to someone who heard Christ's call to be at work with him,

someone who took seriously the call to come, labor on.

Someone who looked at the world and saw depths of hurt that he knew he could do something about.

Not a social worker, not a doctor, not a minister or teacher or aid worker,

but a photographer

who wanted to make sure that we knew what was happening in the world

so that we too could participate in doing something.

Someone who wanted to make sure we saw those fields needing harvest,
and the people needing love.

James Foley, Jimmy Foley, grew up in the faith of Christ, and he took that seriously;
it was his compassion that led him into photojournalism,
and his yearning to do good work.

And when we honor him, as we do in just a moment,
we honor the Spirit of love that is at work in this world,
through us;

we honor the one who calls all of us into the fields of need,
bravely, faithfully, lovingly, wholeheartedly.

Come, Labor On, says Christ.
Amen.