

What Has God Placed in Your Hands?: Matthew 9:35-10:1

Norwalk Christian Church, June 14, 2020, Livestream, Proper 6, Year A - Graduation Sunday

Thank you, so much, to Sara Routh for putting your heart into words and creating that beautiful moving song. This week, the world has continued to change. Protests have turned into action, as cities and states--including the State of Iowa--passed monumental bills bringing reform. The debate has been renewed over the use of the Confederate flag--a symbol that has long represented racism and hate--resulting in bans. Statues of confederate generals, scattered throughout cities, are finally being removed.

It's important to know, these statues are not remnants from the confederacy and the Civil War, but most were put up in the early 1900s, as reconstruction was coming to an end, and the KKK and Jim Crow laws were taking hold. They were intentionally erected in cities and public spaces as a reminder to the black community of who had the power. This is documented history, a segment of our national life we've long forgotten.

So, statues are being removed, many relocated to museums where their story can be told with nuance. But there was one story this week that captured my attention. Since 1918 in Denton, Texas, a city just north of Dallas, outside the Denton County Courthouse on public land, has stood a monument to the confederacy.

And since 1998, Willie Hudspeth has protested this monument. He felt like this was a cause placed in his hands. Here's a picture of him, with the sign he's used for decades.

The Denton local news tells Willie's story: "For many Sundays over the last 21 years, Hudspeth, a retired teacher [and Vietnam War veteran], held signs and protested in front of the monument. He also became a regular at commissioners court meetings – challenging the monument's place in the downtown square."

For 21 years, he labored all by himself. But these last two weeks, others began to labor with him. The nation started paying attention. And a few days ago, the Denton County Commissioners voted to remove the confederate monument to a museum.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;" Jesus said in the Gospel. "Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

This week, Willie Hudspeth finally saw the harvest.

Last week, we saw Jesus commission the disciples as he was preparing to ascend to heaven, giving them the charge to go and make new disciples from every nation.

Our text this week happened several years before that final moment, but here, also, Jesus is commissioning his disciples. The Gospel tells us that "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.” And then, Jesus sends the disciples out to do what?

“Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave *them* authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.”

What Jesus did himself, he gave them authority to also do. Disciples follow their master.

But here’s the reality: There’s always unclean spirits--spirits of racism, injustice, poverty, oppression. There’s always diseases and sicknesses, societal ills and personal ills. These 12 disciples will not be able to cure it all. Nor will we, joining as disciples today.

There is so much justice and goodness and love that needs to be harvested in our world, but are there enough laborers?

This week, we had a meeting at the church of our reopening committee, and afterwards, as we were walking to the car, Marti and I saw Doris Cose, sitting outside with her mask on, teaching English to one of our beloved ELL students. Right in a parking space. It was beautiful.

In the grand scheme of things, it seems like a small action--one on one mentoring in a church parking lot. Small, compared to all in the world that needs to be harvested. But from what I could see, the harvest was bountiful.

Yesterday, 120 leaders from congregations and non-profit organizations around the metro, including three of us from Norwalk Christian, gathered on Zoom for an AMOS delegates assembly. It was the first Zoom meeting like that for AMOS. We heard stories of work being done even in the midst of a pandemic, work around racial profiling that has been ongoing for years, work around access to unemployment benefits, work around training and education as we imagine a rebuilt economy that is more fair and just.

120 leaders on Zoom. It doesn’t seem like a lot, in the grand scheme of things. There’s a lot that needs to be harvested around our community. And yet, lives are being changed. Broken systems are being addressed. And the harvest is bountiful.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;” Jesus says in the Gospel. “Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

The Pulitzer Prize winning author, Annie Dillard, wrote one of my favorite books, *For the Time Being*, a beautiful, poetic essay that dives into the problem of pain and suffering in the world, and how we, being so insignificant, can make a positive impact.

Towards the end of her meditation, she writes, quoting at times the Austrian Jewish theologian Martin Buber: "...the world of ordinary days "affords" us that precise association with God that redeems both us and our speck of the world. God entrusts and allots to everyone an area to redeem: this creased and feeble life, 'the world in which you live, just as it is and not otherwise.' 'It is given to [humanity] to lift up the fallen and to free the imprisoned. Not merely to wait, not merely to look on! [We are] able to work for the redemption of the world.'"

And then she concludes: "The work is not yours to finish...but neither are you free to take no part in it. In our hands, the hands of all of us, the world and life are placed like a Host," and here she's using that old, translated latin term, still used in the Catholic church to describe the bread of communion that, when blessed, becomes connected to the presence of Christ, "The world and life are placed like a Host, ready to be charged with the divine influence. The mystery will be accomplished."

God, she says, has placed a "speck of the world" in our hands, our plot, our area to redeem. What speck of the world has God places in your hands?

The harvest is plentiful and the workers are few, Jesus says. But it's not our job to do it all. It's not our job to solve systemic racism, economic inequality, and whatever societal issues keep us up at night. But nor are we free to ignore it.

Our task is to take what's been given to us. That plot of land. That relationship. Our community. Our family. Our church. Our song--like Sara shared today. God has placed something into your hands, each of us our own unique way that we can join in the harvest, and God is ready to charge that gift with divine blessing.

The laborers are few, yet even as few, we can make a difference. And the more laborers who open their hands ready to join in the harvest, the more God's justice will come.

Just take a look around the country. 2 weeks. It's been 2 weeks, yet people all over are having hard conversations, opening eyes to systemic suffering, and change is already coming. So many laborers are joining the cause of God's justice and love.

To our Graduates, this work is yours, too. As you take your next steps in life, keep your hands open. Receive what God is giving you, and take that blessing and make a difference in the world.

The work is not ours to finish...but neither are we free to take no part in it.

Disciples, Jesus is sending us out to join in the harvest. May we tend to our part, and together we will harvest God's change for the whole world.

Amen.