

“Laborers for the Lord”

July 6, 2025

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Pentecost 4

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. In the last few weeks of worship, we have heard how Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and began his earthly ministry that would lead to the cross. In today’s gospel lesson, the twelve apostles have gone on their way and Jesus sends additional seventy people to fulfill his mission. The seventy return with joy and say to Jesus, *Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!* From the joy in their voices, I wonder if they are still in the “honeymoon period.” Jesus tempers their excitement. He warns them to prepare for a journey that will not be an easy one.

During the summer of 2019, I traveled to Guatemala with my oldest daughter, Leah. We traveled with a charity called Tree 4 Hope, which was started by a pastor and a deacon from our Lower Susquehanna Synod. While in Guatemala, we did some painting and groundskeeping at Hope Academy, a school for girls that Tree 4 Hope was in the process of building. We got to know some of the children at the Miguel Magone home for children, and we helped to lead a Vacation Bible School program—in Spanish! We also served at an elder center near Lake Atitlan. The orphanage itself had about 80 children at the time. The Hope Academy school for girls had planned to open with about 15 elementary-aged girls.

After we returned, Hope Academy got its final approval from the government and opened in late 2019/early 2020, but then had to shut down almost immediately due to Covid. During Covid, Tree 4 Hope distributed food to families, since so many of the families were unable to work. They also provided food for the local families near the orphanage. The school is now open again, they have been thriving and growing. A second branch of the school was even opened this school year at St. Peter’s in Middletown. The children at St. Peter’s are learning in a bilingual environment and communicate online with their counterparts in Guatemala.

A verse from today’s reading keeps calling to me. Jesus tells the disciples, *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.* This is a reality, of course. In Guatemala, Covid took an already precarious living situation for the community surrounding the orphanage and made it even worse. Funds for ministry dried up, people lost their jobs, and more children needed care. It has taken years for Hope Academy and the orphanage to recoup their losses. In our own country, health care workers are in high demand and the economy has needed to adjust by raising wages, which has led to higher consumer prices. And we know that human need never seems to slow down. No matter how hard we try, we can never solve it on our own. We have to trust that God is working through us to reach the needy and those who suffer.

Today’s good news comes through loud and clear in our Isaiah reading when God declares, *As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.* These words of hope were spoken by Isaiah to a people who had lost all hope. The Israelites had endured manipulation by their own leadership and suffered economic hardship. The Babylonians had captured the city of Jerusalem and taken the people hostage. The solution to their woes, according to Isaiah, is proper worship and obedience to God. But that does not mean following proper rituals. It means having an honest and open relationship with God.

The Book of Isaiah calls the people to reject idol worship and instead be pure in heart and honest in intention. God does not require food or drink offerings or anything that would satisfy human needs; instead, God seeks for humans to have a change of heart and to carry out works of justice and mercy. Proper worship of God would mean that the people seek the Lord for guidance and for communion, or in other words, for relationship. And proof of this proper relationship and authentic life would be the people's service to one another in acts of justice and mercy. (*Isaiah 40-66, Interpretation Series, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Paul D. Hanson, John Knox Press, 1995*).

So the disciples of Jesus need some warning and preparation. Their service will not be easy. Service to humanity will not be without cost. We know from our own lives that not everyone wants to hear about Jesus. And not everyone wants to receive help, even when it is offered. Engaging with people in need can have its own roadblocks. But we must not let that stop us.

A neighbor of mine had social workers who used to visit her at home. And I know she was not always friendly to the social workers. Sometimes her paranoia got the best of her and she wouldn't even let them in her house. And you may have tried to reach out and help someone, only to have your help rejected. It happens. I often find myself saying to people who feel frustrated when they serve others, "if your efforts are rejected, wipe the dust off of your feet and move on." You cannot change other people. If someone rejects your offer of help, do not lose heart. It is probably a reflection of their personal issues, not something that you did wrong.

In closing, I would just like to give a word of encouragement. Many people gave up their volunteering duties during Covid and never went back. Many folks have tried to help a neighbor and been rejected. If this happened to you, please try again. The need is great and your help is greatly appreciated! There is a quote floating around, attributed to Martin Luther, that reads like this: "God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does." It's true. We don't have to serve one another to please God. But the urge to help one another comes from our faith in God. We love because God first loved us, and we serve because God first served us. Blessings to you as you do your best to love and serve your neighbor. **Amen.**