

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 18, 2017 (Proper 6A)

“The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” Well, that’s pretty timely considering we’re entering summer at St. John’s. A time when things heat up temperature-wise but cool down program-wise. A time of vacations and family gatherings and warm-weather activities. A time of beaches and boats and backyard barbecues. A time when the harvest may well be plentiful but the *parishioners* are increasingly few.

But that’s okay! Because the mission of the church carries on with or without air-conditioning; with or without a full church; with or without choir pews bursting at the seams or a bevy of acolytes tripping over themselves. And there’s something comforting in the knowledge that the worshipping community gathers week after week regardless of who is here, who is on vacation, who is recovering from surgery (that would be Buffy), or who is out on paternity leave (that would be Noah).

And anyway, you can’t go full tilt *all* year long; you can’t keep your foot on the gas for twelve months out of the year. Even God rested after creating the world in six dizzying days. Whether personally or professionally or ecclesiastically, we all need some down time. What the army calls R & R — rest and relaxation. In more theological terms we might call this sabbath time; a designated period to recharge and refresh and renew and relax.

This takes different forms for different people. For some it’s fishing alone on an isolated lake in Maine; for others it’s spending time lingering over coffee with a friend. For some it’s sleeping in on a rainy morning; for others it’s heading out to Fenway to sit in the bleachers and soak in the sunshine. We are all renewed in different ways.

Now what renewal doesn’t mean is taking the summer off from God. With the change in routine, we may well find God in places beyond the four walls of the church — in nature or in family reunions or in a simple change of scenery. And I’m all for that. It’s always good to be reminded that even though we refer to the church as “God’s House,” God isn’t under house arrest. God doesn’t exclusively reside inside a building. God transcends stone walls and stained glass and even Prayer Books and Bibles.

And yet the other side of that is that our need for the love and example of Jesus, our need for one another, our need to praise God in word and deed, doesn’t take a vacation. And anyway, you can’t take time off from God because God never takes time off from *you*. That’s not how it works. And that is good news.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. The point of this sermon is not to tell people who are in church in the summer to come to church in the summer. I’m glad you’re here! Truly. But it is a reminder that renewal doesn’t mean ignoring or taking a break from your spiritual life; it means embracing it. Hopefully time spent in prayer and worship is a form of renewal for you. Being here after a tough week *should* feel like sipping from a refreshing spring on a hot day. It should replenish your spiritual reserves and help you prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the week ahead. If being here only feels like a chore or an obligation, we have some work to do. You and me both.

Yes, the spiritual life should be challenging and at times it should signal a call to action or the overturning of pre-conceived notions or the questioning of privilege and complacency. It should move us out of our comfort zones and bring us into contact with people and ideas that open our hearts and minds.

But church must also be a place of deep refreshment. A place where you can fully be yourself. A place of solace and strength and comfort. A place where you are nurtured and loved and celebrated simply for being who you are as a child of God. A place to rest and recharge and renew from the challenges and complexities of life. And so, as things slow down and we take some time to renew this summer, make sure that *spiritual* renewal is part of the equation. Go for a hike, but also praise God for the wonder and beauty of creation. Have a fantastic meal with family and friends, but also offer thanks for the many blessings of this life. Renewal and gratitude pair beautifully together.

But back to this “harvest field” Jesus mentions this morning. What is it? “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” Jesus is obviously speaking metaphorically — he’s not bemoaning the fact that there aren’t enough farmhands to plow his soy bean fields. He’s talking about the many people in his midst who have not heard the Good News of the Gospel. That’s the harvest; that’s the mission field Jesus sent the original 12 disciples out into. To preach and teach and share the peace of Christ that people so desperately needed and still need to hear. Just before Jesus talks to the twelve about the harvest and the laborers we hear that he had just returned from a whirlwind tour of preaching and teaching and healing — in other words he had just been out and about among the people. He had listened to them and spoken with them and interacted with them. And we hear that as he gazed upon the crowds he “had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless.” And that they were like “sheep without a shepherd.”

That’s a tough image of people who were spiritually isolated and lonely and feeling unloved. And it broke Jesus’ heart. It’s also a feeling I think we can very much relate to. At least some of the time. I know I have similar thoughts to Jesus when I’m out in what we might think of as today’s harvest field: the streets, the soccer fields, the cubicles, the coffee shops. Places where people aren’t thinking about spiritual things but are involved with and distracted by everything else. Like life. And children. And jobs. And money. People today, just as they were in Jesus’ time, do indeed seem to be “harassed and helpless.” We are imprisoned by our technology and debt and unhealthy relationships; shackled by our obsession with the 24-hour news cycle and celebrity gossip and dearth of silence; chained to addictions in various forms; held captive by our lack of sabbath time and renewal.

Here’s the thing: the harvest field isn’t just “out there.” The harvest field is also right here at St. John’s. We *are* the harvest field. We so desperately need to hear Jesus’ message of compassion and hope in the midst of a turbulent world. And we are also the laborers. Because we also need to share this with one another. To be generous in the ways we interact, to look beyond our own self interest, to offer comfort and consolation. Take heart, friends. We are not in this field alone. Yes, there is much work to be done. But we are in this together. And we are sheep who do indeed have a shepherd in Jesus Christ.