

LITTLE IS MUCH
Matthew 9:35-37

INTRODUCTION:

This past week, Oprah was embarrassed to learn that what she had labeled as “the single greatest love story, in 22 years of doing this show, we've ever told on the air.” was really only a hoax. Herman and Roma Rosenblat made up the tender tale that began with apples and bread at the fence of a concentration camp in Germany, that included getting reacquainted on a blind date in New York City and that culminated with 50 years of marriage.

That love story wasn't true. Let me tell you one that is.

One snow-blanketed night in Canada, Fred Suffield awoke to an urgent pounding at the door of his little house. A half-frozen man reported that a train had stalled in the blizzard and the passengers were in danger of freezing to death. Lighting a lantern, Fred followed the man to the site and led the travelers back to his house.

Through the night and until help arrived, Fred Suffield made coffee, shared his store of food and provided life-saving warm shelter to the stranded passengers. Eventually, help arrived, and the passengers were taken to another waiting train so they could continue their journey.

Sometime later one of the passengers, a woman named Kittie, wrote a thank you note to Fred. Fred replied, and Kittie wrote back. This led to regular correspondence. Their correspondence led to courtship and their courtship led to marriage. As they grew together in Christ, they entered the ministry of evangelism. They never preached for huge crowds in teeming cities. Mostly, they led small meetings in tiny Canadian towns. One might think they would have felt that they hadn't accomplished much since they never really made a name for themselves. But that isn't the way Kittie Suffield felt about it. In the midst of their modest ministry, Kittie wrote the words and the music to a gospel song that reminds us:

*Little is much when God is in it,
 Labor not for wealth or fame;
 There's a crown and you can win it,
 If you'll go in Jesus' name.*

The theme I have chosen for 2009 is “Little Is Much”. Over the next twelve months, I intend that we should explore this theme in a variety of ways and look at it from a variety of angles...all with the view of helping us find our place, whether great or small, in God's enterprise. Because as Kittie Suffield wrote,

Does the place you're called to labor

*Seem so small and little known?
It is great if God is in it,
And He'll not forget His own.*

With the heart of an evangelist, Kittie Suffield began her song by focusing on the harvest fields.

*In the harvest field now ripened
There's a work for all to do;
Hark! the voice of God is calling
To the harvest calling you.*

“Calling me?” you might ask. “Would God be calling me to the harvest field? I’m not a trained evangelist.” I’m no Billy Graham or Rick Warren. If I were a gifted preacher, a best-selling author or famous singer, God might be able to use me in His harvest field. But I don’t have that much to offer.

As others have said, God is not so much interested in our ability as He is interested in our availability. He wants to take what we will bring to Him and then use it for the good of His Kingdom.

Kittie Suffield must have been thinking of Matthew 9:35-57 when she began to write her song:

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

This morning, we are going to take a few minutes to study this text and try to see what Jesus saw.

I. Jesus Saw The Crowds (9:36a)

Verse 35 and the first part of verse 36 reads:

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“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.” Jesus “saw” the crowds. More than merely being aware of them, more than just glimpsing them, more even than simply perceiving them, he “saw” the crowds. He took note of them and saw them with discernment.

It is possible to be surrounded by people and never really see them. Spouses can get to the point that they stop really seeing each other until a crisis forces them to pay attention. A harried mom can be too busy to stop and really look at her children. A preoccupied dad can be in the same house with his kids and not really see them.

The disciples were with Jesus. What did they see? We are not told. But we know what Jesus saw: he saw the crowds.

He saw the crowds because he was among the people. Jesus spent his time among the people. In fact, one of the accusations leveled against him was that he was too social. Jesus said that the people criticized him saying, *“Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”* (Matthew 11:19)

Jesus was not the kind of religious leader who spent his time in the temple, who occupied himself with ceremonies or who invested his energies in academic pursuits. Jesus poured his life into people because people matter. In fact, in this whole wide world and in all the worlds beyond, the only thing that will last for eternity is people. Pour your life into people because people matter.

II. **Jesus Saw Their Crisis (9:36b)**

When Jesus saw the people, he did not just see them as a sea of humanity, he saw them as individual. And he saw them with individual needs. He had been meeting their individual needs. Matthew 9:35 says he had been teaching them, preaching to them and healing every disease and sickness.

But he not only saw and responded to their individual needs, he discerned the underlying crisis that they all had in common. He saw that they were harassed and helpless.

These two words, “harassed” and “helpless” are pastoral terms that come from the world of the shepherds. “Harassed” is *ἔσκυλμένοι* and it means to be clawed, flayed, skinned or ravaged. It is a strong word. When Jesus saw the crowds, he saw them as people who had been ravaged and helpless.

The term for “helpless” was applied to a sheep that had rolled over on its back, exposed its belly and was surrendering to its assailant.

You see, the ignorance, the sickness and the disease were at the surface. But the underlying crisis of these people was that they were being ravaged and they had given up. And Jesus says the reason for that was that they were like sheep without a shepherd. Their leaders, who should have been

guiding and protecting them, not only were not shepherding them, they were taking advantage of them, too.

III. **Jesus Saw The Cure (9:37)**

Jesus saw the people and he saw the crisis they were in. And he saw what it would take to correct the crisis.

Jesus now changes his figure of speech. He had been speaking of livestock: talking about sheep and a shepherd. Still on the farm, now he speaks of crops: talking about fields and a harvest.

William Barclay notes:

When [Jesus] and the orthodox religious leaders of his day looked on the crowd of ordinary men and women, they saw them in different ways. The Pharisees saw the common people as chaff to be destroyed and burned up; [Jesus] saw them as a harvest to be reaped and saved. The Pharisees in their pride looked for the destruction of the sinners; Jesus in his love died for the salvation of sinners.

Jesus saw that there was a need for workers to go to the people to bring them to safety.

What a profound truth. Let this wash over you. No, let it get inside you. Jesus needs people. For whatever reason, Jesus decided to submit himself to people to the extent that he depends on us to get his work done. So he needs human workers to go into the harvest fields to bring people to salvation.

And we have a dual responsibility. Certainly we are to go tell others about Jesus and lead them to him. And we are also to pray for more workers besides. Jesus said, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

The Greek word Jesus chose to use for "ask" is a powerful and plaintive word that means, "to beg". We are not told to simply ask God to provide workers for the harvest field, we are commanded to beg God for help to get the harvest in.

Why do you suppose he wants us to beg? Is it because God isn't really sure he wants this spiritual harvest to be gathered? Maybe God has to be convinced that the harvest is worth it so we need to beg Him.

Maybe the issue is that He likes to see us grovel. He wants us to humble ourselves and beg and plead for workers. Maybe He enjoys watching us trembling, beseeching and imploring Him for help.

You know I don't believe any of that. I suspect that God wants us to beg Him for workers because He wants us to be passionate about the need. Not merely, "Hey, can we get a little help down here?" but more like a passionate, desperate, enthusiastic cry to Almighty God for workers in His field.

And please don't miss that in the text. This is His field. This is His harvest. The gain, the reward, the benefit of the return belongs to God. None of us are to be in this for what we think we can get out of it.

You may not be a famous evangelist with a huge audience in a vast auditorium that you can lead to Jesus. But you live in the harvest field. You may not be able to tell multitudes about Jesus but you can tell a few close friends. And they can tell a few of their friends. And their friends can tell a few others. And before long, everybody will know that Jesus Christ came to shepherd the harassed and helpless who feel like they have been attacked and who've just about given up.

You see, Jesus is not asking you to do something grand and heroic. He's just asking you to do what you can. Tell the people you know and beg God to send someone to tell the people you don't know.

CONCLUSION:

Louis Pasteur, the pioneer of immunology, lived at a time when thousands of people died each year of rabies. Pasteur had worked for years on a vaccine. Just as he was about to begin experimenting on himself, a nine-year-old boy named Joseph Meister was bit by a rabid dog. The boy's mother begged Pasteur to experiment on her son. Pasteur injected Joseph for ten days—and the boy lived.

Decades later, of all the things Pasteur could have had etched on his tombstone, he asked for three words: JOSEPH MEISTER LIVED. Pasteur is considered the father of the germ theory of disease. He developed the process for pasteurizing milk. He was a professor of physics. He was a professor of chemistry. He was the dean of the scientific community of his day. But on his tombstone, he asked for three simple words: JOSEPH MEISTER LIVED. Compared to some of his accomplishments, that may seem like very little to you. But it was much to Pasteur.

For what do you wish to be remembered? Long after you are gone, your fortune will be gone and your fame will fade. All that endures are people. Wouldn't you like to be known for having led someone else to salvation? Three simple words: Joseph Meister Lived. Three simple words: John Doe Saved. Or Mary Smith Saved. What about "Your Son Saved." "Your Daughter Saved. What about four words: Your Best Friend Saved.

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What you can do to help lead another to Jesus may not seem so important to you. But “little is much when God is in it.” Will you commit to do what you can in the harvest field of the Lord?

INVITATION: # 661 – *“Little Is Much When God Is In It”*