

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Harassed and the Harvesters

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Grace to you and peace from the One who views creation with compassion and love: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Jesus looks out at the crowds, and Matthew tells us what he sees; not a mass to be managed nor a problem to be solved. He sees **people**. Faces. Lives. Stories. Bodies carrying stress and fear. Families carrying debt and grief. Workers ground down by wages that don't match the cost of bread. Villages surveilled by soldiers. Communities taught to keep their eyes down and their voices quiet. And Jesus is "moved with compassion," because they are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

That phrase matters. "Harassed and helpless" isn't just a mood. It's not simply that the crowds are having a hard week. It names a condition produced by systems; by rulers, by policies, by the machinery of domination. It describes what happens when people are *acted upon* until life feels like an endless flinch.

The crowds are harassed because those who are supposed to be their shepherds are not shepherds at all. They are leaders who do not gather and protect but rather scatter and consume. The prophets of Israel called them what they were: false shepherds who fatten themselves while the flock is torn open. And in Jesus' day, the wolves of empire had many teeth; taxes, soldiers, debt, religious gatekeeping, purity systems weaponized to exclude, and the constant threat of punishment for anyone who disrupted the order.

If we're honest, we don't have to strain to find the same harassment now. We see it in the relentless wave of anti-trans legislation sweeping across the country; bills that turn healthcare into contraband, that treat a child's existence as a controversy, that criminalize teachers, doctors, and parents for refusing to abandon kids to despair. We see it when politicians and attorneys general seek registries of transgender people, when they demand lists and data and names, tools that have

historically not been used for protection, but rather for targeting. We see it in the rhetoric that manufactures fear, that trains communities to treat their neighbors as threats, that makes cruelty feel like “common sense.”

That is harassment. And it is not abstract. It lands on bodies; on trans and nonbinary siblings, on queer youth, on families trying to keep their children alive, on adults simply trying to work, love, worship, and exist without being hunted.

So hear the Gospel clearly, Jesus does not look at harassed people with suspicion. Jesus does not ask them to prove they are worthy of care. Jesus does not lecture them about being “too political” or “too visible.” Jesus sees them, and compassion rises in him like a wildfire.

But then Jesus does something that surprises anyone trained in the empire’s imagination. Because the empire always tells the story this way; a lone savior will fix it. A strongman. A superhero. A single charismatic leader who will take power, crush the villains, and rescue the vulnerable from above. That is the mythology of “power-over,” a top-down salvation that still depends on domination, just with a different person holding the whip.

But Jesus refuses that script. He looks at the crowds and says to his disciples: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” He does not say, “The harvest is plentiful, but don’t worry, I’ve got it.” He does not say, “The harvest is plentiful, so let’s wait until things calm down.” He does not say, “The harvest is plentiful, so pray that God sends someone else.” He says: pray for laborers. And then he does the most radical thing ever, he *makes laborers*.

Matthew says Jesus gives the disciples real authority to cure, to heal, to cast out unclean spirits, to announce God’s reign, to create pockets of liberation in a world organized for despair. Jesus shares power. Jesus democratizes power. Jesus creates a community of holy troublemakers who will do the work not as spectators, but as participants.

And this is where Exodus 19 comes into focus. After God brings the people out of slavery, God does not say, “Congratulations, you’re free, now go live your separate private lives.” Instead, God says something startling, *the whole people* are called into covenant. “You shall be my treasured possession... a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

A priestly kingdom means that the work of mediation (care, blessing, justice, repair) is not reserved for an elite class. It is distributed. Shared. Carried together. God's liberation is never merely individual escape; it is communal vocation. God forms a people whose life together becomes a sign that Pharaoh does not get the final word.

So when Jesus sends disciples, he is not inventing something new out of thin air. He is calling Israel into its deep identity, a liberated people made for collective care. A community built to resist the logic of empire.

Now, some of us hear that and think, "But I'm not a healer. I'm not trained. I'm not brave. I'm not powerful." Good. That means you are finally close enough to the Gospel to hear it. Because Scripture and liberation theology and the witness of queer and trans Christians all tell the same truth: God consistently chooses what the world calls foolish and weak, so that the world's so-called strength is exposed for the fraud it is. God chooses shepherd boys and enslaved midwives. God chooses exiles and widows. God chooses fishermen with rough hands and frightened hearts. God chooses the ones the world tries to erase.

God chooses the marginalized, the queer, the trans, the outcast, not as a diversity project, not as a token, but as beloved bearers of divine image; often with a clarity about survival and solidarity that comfortable people have never had to learn. Which means this, the people the empire harasses are not merely the objects of our charity. They are often the *prophets* of God's radical Kin-dom. The ones who can teach the church what it means to tell the truth, to practice courage, to build mutual care, to refuse dehumanization.

So when Matthew 10 says Jesus gives authority to cast out unclean spirits, we have to stop imagining only spooky demons in the corners of our private lives. Unclean spirits are also the forces that make whole communities sick. Transphobia. Christian nationalism. White supremacy. Misogyny. The idolatry of "order" that always means somebody else must suffer for someone else's comfort. The spirit that says, "Your body is a problem," "Your identity is a threat," "Your life is negotiable."

Jesus authorizes a movement to cast that out, to name it, resist it, and replace it with the practices of God's reign; healing, welcome, truth-telling, and protection. But

Jesus is also honest about the cost. “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.” This is certainly not romantic language. Jesus is not interested in glamorizing suffering. Jesus is simply describing reality. Wolves bite. Wolves isolate. Wolves use fear to turn the flock against itself. Wolves will call compassion “dangerous.” Wolves will call truth “division.” Wolves will call basic dignity “indoctrination.”

And Jesus says, don’t become wolves to fight wolves. “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Do not adopt the empire’s tools of domination, dehumanization, and violence. We do not win liberation by becoming what we resist.

But “innocent as doves” does not mean passive. It does not mean quiet. It does not mean “stay out of it.” Sheep among wolves must learn a fierce, collective protection. If the flock scatters, the wolves pick them off one by one. If the flock stays together...if the flock practices with-ness...then the vulnerable are not left alone. That is why this moment requires a difficult track, structural repentance.

Repentance is not private guilt. Repentance is turning around. Changing direction. Moving our bodies, our money, our time, our social risk. Repentance is the church refusing to be a bystander while the empire builds new scapegoats.

So what does it look like to be harvesters of God’s justice, right now, in a world that harasses trans and nonbinary people? It looks like concrete solidarity that costs something. It looks like making the phone calls, again and again, to legislators and school boards. Not just one polite call that lets us feel like we tried, but persistent pressure that says these policies are violent, and we will not consent.

It looks like showing up, at rallies, at school meetings, at protests, putting your name beside the names being scrutinized, so that trans people are not forced to stand alone under the spotlight of hatred. Presence is protection.

It looks like interrupting “reasonable” transphobia; the jokes, the casual slurs, the “I’m just asking questions,” the attempts to make cruelty sound neutral. It looks like saying, in real time: “That’s not true.” “That’s not loving.” “That’s not acceptable here.” Because normalization is one of the wolves’ sharpest tools.

It looks like churches becoming places where trans and nonbinary people do not have to wonder if they are safe. Not a vague “all are welcome” with no backing, but clear commitments; names honored, pronouns respected, bathrooms accessible, leadership opened, policies aligned, and an active readiness to defend.

And we do all this not because we are trying to be heroes, because Jesus refuses the lone savior myth. Jesus makes a community of laborers. Jesus sends out a people. Which brings us to Psalm 100, that shout of praise that is not naïve but defiant: “Know that the Lord is God... We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” In other words, our safety is not the empire’s promise of security. The empire’s “security” always requires someone else to be treated as a threat. The empire’s peace is built on someone else’s fear.

Our safety is the fierce, protective love of God and God’s people, the kind of love that does not abandon the harassed, does not negotiate with dehumanization, and does not call cruelty “just politics.”

And finally, Romans 5: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Christ does not wait for us to be lovable. Christ does not wait for us to be understood. Christ does not wait for us to fit into respectable categories. Christ meets us in the place of danger, in the place of shame, in the place where the empire tries to decide who counts. And there Jesus loves us, all of us, enough to die for us.

Go out as harvesters; not harvesting people for the church, but harvesting justice, harvesting mercy, harvesting the kind of community where no one is disposable. Go out with compassion in your eyes, wisdom in your strategy, innocence in your methods, and courage in your solidarity. And when the wolves of empire howl, remember, you are not alone. The laborers are rising. The flock is learning to protect. The Spirit is still moving.

We are God’s people, every trans child of God, every queer saint, every exhausted parent, every lonely retiree, every frightened disciple, every brave truth-teller. And in the in-breaking Kin-dom of God, the harassed are not abandoned. They are gathered. They are defended. They are celebrated. They are loved, exactly as they were created to be. Amen.