

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

Growing up Baptist in the south, this part of the Gospel was often used to condemn people who didn't attend church. As I got older, I came to learn that this wasn't a condemnation of those not in church, more often of those of us who were. Because to do the work of God in the world requires doing even more work within ourselves.

Today's Gospel is often used to justify the type of evangelism that I grew up with. Preaching on street corners, telling others they were condemned if they didn't change to be what we believed was right, preaching conversion based on fear. After all, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah for those that don't listen.

But we miss something else in the Gospel. How are we to behave? Like sheep among the wolves, wise like serpents and innocent as doves. Why? Because the message God calls us to preach isn't one of condemning our neighbors but loving them. Loving the people that society says aren't "worth" it. Putting others before our needs. And bowing before God instead of holding our actions up for others to see.

Sharing the love of God as we are called to do in today's Gospel isn't easy. It isn't comfortable. Not for us, and not for those around us. That's why we are warned it will cause strife. The Love of God is radical in that it makes no sense. Loving someone who hates you. Loving someone who has done you wrong. Standing up for the people that everyone "knows" are not as good as we are. Dining with those people, talking with those people, loving those people.

This is the radical love that Jesus not only preached in word, but in action. For us to do the same 2000 years later is sadly, just as radical and uncomfortable, for others and for ourselves.

It is uncomfortable because we have told ourselves how bad those people are. And yes, some of those people smell. And some of those people live in ways we don't. Some of those people do commit crimes and do horrible things. That is why God commands us to love our neighbor, as that is oddly far easier than liking them.

The Samaritan loved the man he found beaten on the side of the road. Despite the fact that Samaritans and Jews have distrusted and disliked one another for centuries. He cared for him and made sure he was able to recover. What must the Jewish man have thought when he saw the face of the one who loves him in such a way? When he shared the story with his Jewish friends and family, what must they have thought, after all, those people are supposed to be horrible.

The Gospel tells us that if people don't accept our message of love, we are to shake the dirt from our shoes and leave. We don't condemn them, we don't pray fire down from heaven, we don't do any of the fun old testament things, we just leave. You know what else it doesn't say? It doesn't say we don't come back. People hear the word of God when the spirit moves them to do so. Just because we love someone once and they reject that love, doesn't mean we don't try again. After all, that is the approach God takes with us.

The other uncomfortable part of this Gospel is the warning Jesus gives. Preaching God's love will upset people. But notice who gets upset, "they will turn you over to their councils and their synagogues." The love of Christ is antithetical to the love of power. It challenges the establishment, both political and ecclesiastical and neither of those are comfortable with that.

Let's be honest, there are plenty of worship communities that use the Gospel as a weapon instead of a balm. They hold forgiveness over people as a prize that can be withheld. They hide behind the Gospel

message which has been poorly translated to say if you retain the sins of any, you retain them (the sins, but that's another sermon). They get angry at words like Black Lives Matter or love your gay family member or single mothers shouldn't be shamed. Because saying those things and acting on those things mean we have to love people who we may have made a habit of not loving to make us feel better about ourselves.

The epistle reading for today sums it up, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." I can assure you that if Christ is willing to forgive my sins, then I am in no position to tell someone they don't get forgiveness for theirs. I forgive them and love them until such time as the Holy Spirit helps them understand that they are forgiven children of God as well.

That's grace. Grace for me, to find a path to loving my neighbor and a path to accepting the love from my neighbor. Grace for knowing that when I shake the dust from my shoes and leave, I don't take the presence of God with me. God remains there, to work the miracles that only God can through the spirit.

Grace to know that God's love for another human doesn't end, diminish, or dampen the love God has for me. And grace to know, God's love is so overwhelming and overflowing, I can't hoard it for myself, I have to share it freely and without pretense or expectation of return and that is the Gospel that few people seem to be willing to labor for.

Amen