



June 18-19, 2023 – Pentecost 3

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Theme: Christianity Is NOT a Spectator Sport

1. Have Compassion 2. Pray 3. Proclaim God's Kingdom is Near

Sermon Text: Matthew 9: 35- Matthew 10:8

⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming 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." Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Dear fellow believers and willing workers in God's kingdom,

America may not have invented the spectator sport – but we've nearly perfected it. This past week, I researched a working definition for spectator sports and discovered the following: a spectator sport is one where more people watch a sport than participate in it. If that's true, then think about how it works in a typical Minnesota Twins' baseball game: 9 men down on the field in desperate need of a rest and 20,000 people up in the stands in desperate need of exercise.

Now, I like spectator sports as much as the next fan. And maybe you do too. But, sad to say, this is what often happens in a Christian congregation. Most tend to be spectators – content to simply sit on the sidelines and watch others serve in ministry and maybe even burn themselves out in ministry. Have you ever seen that happen before? And when it does, that's certainly not what our good and gracious God wants and others miss out on valuable Christian service. Let me ask a pointed question: are you simply a fan of Jesus or His follower? Don't answer so quickly! Think about it again: are you a fan of Jesus or His follower? In the Bible, we never read how Jesus is only interested in a fan club. He doesn't command us to sit in the stands choosing when to clap or complain. We do read in the Bible how Jesus calls us to follow Him closely as we witness, worship, learn, and practice Christian stewardship when it's easy and when it's not. So I pray you remember the words of our sermon text from the Gospel of

Matthew and also remember: **Christianity Is NOT a Spectator Sport.** Instead, listen carefully as God calls each of us to play an active role in His kingdom. This needs to be said upfront: God is more than just a coach, for a coach can be ignored. God is our LORD, our Savior-God who loves us more than we realize. And we are more than just players on His team, for players can be terminated for any reason – we are His chosen, dearly loved people, saved from sin, from death, and from hell – saved for a purpose.

And that purpose is summed up in Jesus' own words: ***the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.*** With these words, Jesus wasn't talking about an earthly crop harvest of corn or soybeans, but an eternal harvest of souls – people we know – and people we don't. But, all of these precious souls need to be reached with the saving Gospel message. So what is Jesus teaching us this week? It's an urgent call to reach precious souls, by first of all having compassion on them, by praying for them, and finally proclaiming the kingdom of God to them.

Our reading starts this way: 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.*** Jesus' ministry never seemed to let up. It seemed like He always had important things to do: teaching, preaching, and healing. He didn't just rule the world, hopelessly out of touch from His divine throne in heaven. He worked among the people on earth getting to know them and helped them: in groups and one on one. When Jesus saw these crowds, He had compassion on them. That shows us a rather human side of Jesus, doesn't it? He related to people as one who is 100% human. He cared about each person he crossed paths with. He saw their physical needs and helped them. But, Jesus, as 100% true God was able to dig deeper. And what did Jesus see? He saw their spiritual needs how ***they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*** The picture here is that of a sheep being cut up and bleeding after passing through a heavy patch of thorns. They had been through the ringer. That described the Jews. The religious leaders of the day demanded much ritual and offered little spiritual peace. The people were on their own, sheep without a shepherd, spiritually helpless, vulnerable, and hopelessly lost in their sin and guilt.

How do you look at people today? What you notice about another person reveals what's important to you. When I walk through Walmart in the electronic department and the salesman looks at my phone to see if it's the latest and greatest, it's because he sees me as a potential customer. In a much greater way, we in the soul-winning business – every Christian is. It's our high privilege and great mission. When we cross paths with others, do we have compassion on them and see their deep spiritual needs or are we content to remain just spectators? It's not our job to convert hearts. Only the Holy Spirit can do that through the Word to souls who are spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. It's our role to do the witnessing – to give a simple reason for the hope we have and to invite them to hear more about Jesus at *St. Paul's*. Oh, that we look at every person God brings into our lives as more than a potential customer ... but like Jesus does with deep a compassion and deep concern for souls. For they are precious souls who will live forever in heaven or in hell. Think about our

friends – if we can talk with them about summer vacation plans or the latest Minnesota Twins’ game, can we talk with them about where they go to church? Our relatives – if we want to be around them on earth, can we talk with them about being around them in heaven? Our neighbors – if we look after their flowers or garden when they go on vacation, can we also look after their souls? Can we use Jesus as our model for ministry here? Can we look at them as sheep without a shepherd? Oh, I know what you’re thinking. Pastor – you don’t understand. That person I’m thinking about has strayed from God, so far from God ... by their own string of bad decisions. To that, I say think of Jesus as He connected with the Samaritan woman at the well who lived with a man who wasn’t her husband to the soldiers who crucified Him. Jesus never condoned sin, not once. No more than He condones the secret sins of our hearts either. He knows all sin is deadly and damning. For Jesus Christ, God’s Son and our Brother came to earn forgiveness on the cross for every sinner. Like St. Paul who testified in Romans chapter 5: ***8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*** Talk about good news. We are forgiven freely and fully by Jesus Christ who is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep, wandering-lazy-stinking-sinful sheep like us to make us right with God. We have His bloodstained cross and empty tomb as proof.

So Christianity Is Not a Spectator Sport. How are we to be active? It’s simple. By praying. Jesus said: ***38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*** It seems so simple, yet oh so overlooked. Prayer – talking to God. Jesus doesn’t just say watch everyone else pray. He commands each of us to pray. Pray specifically to ask God to send workers into His harvest field. There’s a lot of mission work to do and little time to waste. Be more than a Spectator this week. Pray. Talk with God and humbly ask Him to send more witnesses to help you reach the people God has placed into your life. And pray that God uses you first to love those who are not so lovable, to be patient with those who are not so patient, and to help those who may not want your help. God answers our prayer one day at a time. Be bold and ask our Father in heaven for help as dear children ask their dear fathers on earth.

Finally, Jesus’ prayer is followed by action. That’s because Christianity Is More than a Spectator Sport. Our reading concludes ***1 He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. 2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. 5 These twelve Jesus sent out.*** Here was Jesus’ first century dream team of witnesses. Honestly, there was nothing special about any of them. He sent ordinary people into His harvest field, to accomplish extraordinary things by His Holy Spirit. He called them to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is near. Time is of the essence because no one knows how much time they have on the clock of this world. And He used both their strengths and weaknesses. Imagine if an earthly consultant evaluated their personalities. What would that consultant say? Here in my hands, I have one example report: *To: Jesus of Nazareth. From: Jerusalem Management Consultants. Dear Sir: Thank you for submitting the*

resumes of the twelve men you have picked for managerial positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests and we have run the results through our computer. As part of our service, we make some general comments for your guidance. It is our opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have a team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for better people of experience in managerial ability.

Here's why. Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew the tax collector had been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus have radical leanings as Zealots, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depression scale. One of your candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a resourceful man, meets people where they are at, has a keen business mind, and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your CEO and right-hand man. We wish you every success in your new venture. While business principles are clearly helpful in doing the work of the LORD, they aren't always accurate. My friends, if Jesus can use a group of sinners like the 12 apostles in His kingdom, He can certainly use us you and me to proclaim the kingdom of heaven is near.

That's because Christianity is not a spectator sport. It's not something we can watch from the sidelines for very long. It's not a hobby for the weekend nor something special to do only for the holidays. As we leave St. Paul's church doors behind, may God open our eyes to our own personal mission fields. And may we answer the call of Isaiah with these personal words: Here am I LORD, send me. Amen.