

June 14, 2026

Third Sunday After Pentecost

“Harvested”

Matthew 9:35-10:8

*“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*

These words of Jesus tend to evoke sympathy from us because of the pitiful state of these people—“harassed and helpless.” Exactly why they are in such a state isn’t explained. Maybe it’s because they have lousy spiritual leaders who continually beat them down with the demands of the law. Or perhaps it’s the burden of sin and guilt they bear, failing to understand that God is mercy, love and forgiveness. Or maybe it’s just that they are too caught up in the world, chasing that which doesn’t endure, falling to the temptation of the devil to trust in the creation rather than the Creator and failing to seek the higher things of God.

Whatever it is, Jesus has compassion on them because of their sorry state and naturally then, so do we. And of course, we are happy that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is there for them. The strange and somewhat hypocritical thing is that while we have pity for these people and hope they came to know Jesus as their shepherd and Savior, we who know Christ as Lord today so often in various ways desire to be these people—a sheep without a shepherd.

To understand what I mean you first need to be clear on how shepherding in our understanding differs from that in first-century Israel. We think of shepherding as in forcing the sheep in a certain direction from behind them, sometimes using those cool border collies you see on YouTube. In Jesus time, and actually still in the Middle East today, shepherding is done by leading; speaking to the sheep and they willingly follow the shepherd.

Now think about it. How often does the truth of God’s good design for your life seem like something forced upon you, like a shepherd standing behind you with a staff compelling you in the right direction? A conversation turns into gossip—the prodding of the shepherd’s staff is to move away, but you’d really rather stay and gab about somebody. Or those shows or websites you know a holy child of God should avoid, yet even if you resist the temptation, you do so grudgingly, resenting the loss as if you’ve been forced to abstain. St. Paul writes “the Lord loves a cheerful giver” yet when we’re asked to give, sometimes we do so as if the Lord were prying open our wallet with a crowbar.

We can glom onto an attitude that God is strongarming us, that we’re the harassed and helpless before Him, and in that, desire to be a sheep without a shepherd.

But we know Jesus isn’t strongarming us. He doesn’t force us to do anything. He calls us to follow Him. The Holy Spirit draws us to Him. We know the wonderful, perfect and eternal life to which He leads us. We want to follow. But we struggle with this also. Of course we do. Jesus isn’t unclear about the cost of discipleship: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*

That cross may call for suffering, sacrifice. Without a doubt it calls us to turn away from the world and toward our Savior, following the One who has overcome the world. But we like the world too much. Our repeated sins are us turning away from Christ. He is leading, but we so often choose not to follow. In the midst of our sins we say, maybe not with our mouth but with our actions, I want to be a sheep without a shepherd.

Folks, look around the world with the eyes of Jesus. Millions upon millions of people are living apart from Christ without the peace He gives; the certain hope of eternal salvation. They don't know His compassion and love. They don't seek and receive His forgiveness. They do not stand reconciled to God. They are harassed and helpless before Satan, sin and ultimately, death.

See what a horrible situation they are in, and appreciate how blessed you are to not be a sheep without a shepherd! We are the redeemed of God; victors in Christ over all enemies that seem to harass us in this broken world. We are far from helpless! *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."* St. Paul's words in Romans 8 are used at a lot of funerals, but we really should bring them to mind anytime with feel that following Christ is some type of burden: *"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Christ's compassion for the harassed and helpless led to the cross. There He looked like the harassed and helpless one and in a way, He was. It was there that He hung helpless under the judgment of God, harassed by the divine wrath for our sins. Because of this action, we who have been given the grace to trust this work of God now receive nothing but the undeserved favor of God! *"Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God."*

This is the Gospel. It is God's will this Gospel be proclaimed to the harassed and helpless, thus Christ's exhortation, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

Through no merit of your own the laborers have delivered this Gospel to you. You stand harvested, baptized and dwelling in the kingdom of God. You are no longer the harassed and helpless. My main point today is to remind you of this so you lose the attitude that you somehow are.

I'm sure many of you are facing challenges in life right now. Some of you may be enduring actual harassment by the evil of the world. Some of you, by the measure of the world, may be helpless in enduring some affliction or injustice. It's temporary. You'll get over it. The world is for a moment. The kingdom is forever.

Don't think God has failed you. Don't think God has somehow victimized you. Most especially don't covet the world and think your shepherd is robbing you of it. Follow Him where He is leading.

Some of us may have resented waking early and coming to this Divine Service. What were we thinking? That our Shepherd was swatting us on the rear end with His staff, forcing us to come? That's crazy.

Did we hear Him calling us to follow, but we kind of didn't want to? If so, what did you think you were losing? Whatever it was, was it worth turning away from your shepherd? Of course not.

You showed up, and what are you receiving? The Gospel. Forgiveness proclaimed. The Savior's body and blood to sustain your faith. The proclamation of the eternal name into which you stand baptized! The absolute assurance that, though the assaults of Satan and the world try to paint you as harassed and helpless, you stand victorious in Christ in the very kingdom of God forever.

Open your eyes and see how blessed you are forever. Love following your Shepherd, and pray for those who have yet to enter His harvest.

Amen.