

“The Labor Shortage” by Rev. Kim Leslie

Kim Leslie
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Matthew 9:35-10:8
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"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the [workers] are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out [workers] into his harvest.'"

Once again there's a farm labor shortage in the Valley. This time it's tied up with the hot-button post 9/11 immigration issues. Some want the borders, or at least the southern border, padlocked. Others, saying they can't find workers to harvest the crops, want changes in immigration law to allow more workers from Mexico or even countries such as the Philippines to come do the work they say most citizens aren't willing to do. Employers in Silicon Valley have asked for and in the past gotten similar exceptions, claiming there aren't enough of the kind of qualified workers they need in the U.S.

Well, when it comes to the church, there's no doubt in my mind that there's a labor shortage -- a shortage of people who share Jesus' compassion for the harassed and helpless -- or at least a shortage of people who share that compassion enough to do anything about it.

"There is a marvelous story of a man who once stood before God, his heart breaking from the pain and injustice in the world. 'Dear God,' he cried out, 'look at all the suffering, the anguish and distress in your world. Why don't you send help?' God responded, 'I did send help. I sent *you*.' [italics added] [David Wolpe says,] 'When we tell our children that story, we must tell them that each one of them was sent to help repair the broken world—and that it is not the task of an instant or of a year, but of a lifetime.'"ⁱ

Why is it that there aren't more Christians who see themselves as the help that God has sent to this hurting world? Is it that we don't see the need? Is it that we don't think we're qualified for the work?



Jesus saw the people like sheep without a shepherd, but he wasn't talking about his disciples. He was talking about the people he was sending his disciples to serve. The disciples aren't supposed to be sheep without a shepherd. We have a shepherd -- and we've been sent to do his work.

But, as anyone who's ever been around them knows, "Sheep get lost by nibbling away at the grass and never looking up. The same can be said for us. We can focus so much on what's [right in front of] us that we fail to see life in larger perspective."

If somebody volunteered to go to Bolivia as a missionary but absolutely refused to learn even Spanish, not to mention the native Aymara or Quechua languages, we'd think that was a self-defeating attitude. But a lot of churches do pretty much the same thing. We say we're

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friendly. We say we welcome strangers. But then, too often, we don't make the effort to show enough hospitality to talk about our faith in language and music a stranger can understand.

We're not willing to venture beyond the comfort zone of what's familiar to *us*, what has meaning for *us*, what *we* can relate to. We refuse to venture out of that zone even for the sake of somebody else in genuine need.

Steve May, now a pastor himself, tells a sad story about churches and people actively seeking a place to belong. He says, "When I was in my early twenties, I moved to a new city. Immediately I began looking for a new church home. Being a 'company man,' I attended the church of my denominational affiliation. The first church I visited, no one spoke to me but an usher. The second church I visited, no one spoke to me, period. The third church was only slightly different. On my first Sunday, no one spoke to me, but that afternoon the Associate Pastor came by and invited me back to church. I attended another service there. No one spoke to me but later in the week the Minister to Young Adults came by and invited me to a Young Adult function. I attended, and even though I am reasonably outgoing, I had a difficult time making friends with anyone. It was a pretty tight knit group and I didn't fit in. I ended up sitting quietly by myself that evening. I had decided to give up when the Choir Director dropped by my house one evening and asked me to sing in the choir. I said I would. I attended choir practice three Wednesdays in a row and sang in the church choir three Sundays in a row. Still, I had not had any kind of substantive conversation with anyone, beyond 'My name is Steve.' It finally dawned on me that the only people who would talk to me were the ones who were being paid to do it! Here I was: lonely, living in a new city, eager to make friends, and motivated to find a church home, but each church I visited seemed too self-absorbed to welcome outsiders. When I quit attending I never heard a word from the Associate Pastor, the Minister to Young Adults, the Choir Director, or anyone else -- until the church contacted me two years later

asking for a contribution to their new building program!

"It's sad to say it, but this scenario is repeated every week of the year..."

"By the way, here's how my search for a church home ended. I attended yet another church. While I was in the parking lot, walking towards the front door, an older gentleman fell in step with me and began a conversation. He asked me if I was new. I said 'Yes.' When we got inside, he introduced me to two other people, one of whom invited me to sit with his family. I later learned the man in the parking lot was a solemn and stern judge--not one to waste words. However, his simple effort made the difference for me that day: I found a church home." ⁱⁱ

Nearly every church says it's a friendly church, but, like Steve and I, you may have had the kind of experience that proves otherwise.

If we really want to make a difference in the world, at church, as ordinary Christians at school, at work, at the mall, at the game, we've got to put our money where our mouths are -- and not just talk the talk but *walk* the talk.

St. Francis, a spoiled rich merchant's son, who left that life to devote himself to God's creation and to serving the poor as one of them, is said to have told his followers, "preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

The Edgar Guest poem that goes, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day; I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way," may be trite, but it's true.ⁱⁱⁱ People beyond these walls don't want to hear people talk about God, they want to see what difference God makes in how we live our lives, how we put our faith into action, and how that makes a difference in other people's lives, how it counts for something, how it leaves the world a better place. They want no part of the hypocrisy that they see in the media's portrayal of so-called Christians.

"But when someone walks the talk, they pay attention. This is why people like Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, and Jimmy Carter are

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treated with such respect—even by our cynical ...media. You just don't hear many people criticize [them]. You may not agree with [them], but you cannot help but respect their integrity. When a person walks the talk, the world is ready to listen."^{iv}

What is walking the talk? Well, it's not busying ourselves with what I call "Churchianity" that serves as a poor substitute for Christian living – busying ourselves with the business of running the institution. It's the little things - the attitudes - the kindnesses we do spontaneously when an opportunity presents itself. It's what we do twenty-four, seven that shows who we really are. It's the apparently random acts of kindness that matter in the end -- our willingness to offer positive alternatives to the prevailing mean-spiritedness instead of joining in it, to gently but firmly challenge a racist remark, to let somebody go ahead of you in line, a smile offered a complete stranger when you have nothing to gain by it, a word of sympathy to a beleaguered clerk, the courage to speak a word of God's grace in the face of someone's holier-than-thou insensitivity.

"An eager young evangelist approached an Amish man and said, 'Sir, are you a Christian?' The Amish man said, 'Why ask me such a question? I can tell you anything. Why don't you visit my banker, my grocer, my farm hands, my children. Ask them if I am a Christian. If I am or not, they'll certainly be able to tell.'"^v

When what we do reflects what we say we believe, people will take us seriously. All you need is integrity. But you don't have to be Mother Teresa or Jimmy Carter.



After all, Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples were more like the "Dirty Dozen" than haloed heroes. They weren't picked "most likely to become apostles" for their high school yearbooks.

A pastor met "with a group of elementary school children... discussing this ...text, Jesus' calling of the Twelve. [He] pointed out to them how these disciples turned out to be very ordinary people. Peter was impetuous and shortsighted. He was constantly making mistakes. [Matthew was a disreputable tax collector.] Judas later betrayed Jesus. When the going got rough, they all forsook Jesus and fled into the darkness.

"What does that tell you about Jesus, from the people he chose?' [he] asked the group.

"They sat there in numbed silence for some time. Then one of the young boys responded: 'I suppose it shows us that Jesus was a lousy judge of character.'"

OK, so maybe it does, but isn't that good news for us? If he was willing to trust his mission to people like that, and they were actually able to do what he sent them to do, miraculous as it was, and in spite of their glaring lack of qualifications, doesn't that mean Jesus can choose ordinary, flawed people like us to do his work, too?^{vi}

By God's grace, ordinary people do extraordinary things. Nothing's said here about the disciples being qualified or chosen because of their skill or experience or spiritual depth. The time came for Jesus to have some help, so he picked twelve people work with him. We know

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their names, but precious little more than that, and a lot of what we do know isn't good.^{vii}

Maybe Jesus sees something in us we can't see in ourselves. After all, how many of you would ever think of yourselves as particularly qualified to bring Jesus' healing touch to the broken and brokenhearted - to share the good news of God's love with a skeptical world?^{viii}

"...A woman ...was called to be a disciple. She had spent most of her life raising a family. One day she looked up and her family was gone. There was no longer anybody there who needed her. Did her life have any more meaning? Had she lost all of her significance as a human being? She presented herself at her church, asking to be given something to do. She said to [her pastor], 'Unfortunately, I haven't had any real work experience. I'm afraid there is not much that I could be useful for in the church.'

"She was wrong. As a mother of four children, she had wonderful organizational skills. Those skills were used to organize the church's first Habitat for Humanity work team. She was good at organizing people, getting people to make commitments, and following up on their commitments. These skills, learned as a mother, proved to be marvelously useful to the church in its business of proclaiming and enacting the gospel."^{ix}



One evening while a man was driving down a country road, he lost control of his car and wound up in a ditch. He walked to the closest farm house and asked for help pulling the car out. The farmer said, "Sure. Let me hitch up Dusty and you'll be out in no time." A few

minutes later the farmer appeared with Dusty— an old, swaybacked, almost blind mule. After

Dusty was hitched to the car, the old farmer cracked the whip and said, "Pull, Buck, pull." Nothing happened. The farmer cracked the whip again and said, "Pull, Clyde, pull." Nothing happened. He cracked the whip again and said, "Pull, Dusty, pull." Dusty began to pull until finally the car was out of the ditch.

The man thanked the farmer, then said,

"But I'm really curious. If your mule's name is Dusty, why did you say 'Pull, Buck' and 'Pull Clyde'?"

The farmer said, "Well, you know Dusty's old and he doesn't see too good, and he doesn't have much confidence. If he thought he had to do all the work himself, he'd never even try."

"That's our greatest limitation—our unwillingness to try. [even though we're not really alone at all.] Many people are afraid to believe in themselves. They say, "I'm only one person, what can I do?" and "I'm nothing special, I can't make a difference" and "...God could never use me." We sing that chorus over and over until we believe it more than we believe the Gospel [the good news of God's gracious love lived by Jesus, but] according to the gospel, we were created for greatness. In the New Testament we see that we have unlimited potential.^x

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Remember, Matthew tells us that "...Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority ...

Jesus sent [these twelve] out with the following instructions: "Go ...to the lost sheep... As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons...."

It wasn't something they earned, or anything they did to deserve it. It's the way Jesus does things. Picks the most unlikely, unqualified, uncredentialed people and shows us what God can do with us. It's not anything we have, but his gifts to us, that give even you and me the power to heal the broken and bring good news to the hopeless.



An old Quaker story tells about a visitor coming into the silence of a Friends' Meeting for worship and [not knowing that in Quaker worship no one speaks unless moved by the Inner Light,] asking the person next to him, "What time does the service begin?" The Quaker said, "When the worship is over."^{xi}

Let the service begin.

ⁱDavid J. Wolpe: Teaching Your Children About God, in "Illustrations," *ministrynow.com*

ⁱⁱSteve May, "Does The Church Have Something To Say?" Colossians 4:5. *ministrynow.com*

ⁱⁱⁱEdgar Guest, "Sermons We See."

^{iv}Steve May, "Walk The Talk," 1 John 3:1-7, *MinistryNow.com*

^vSteve May, "Walk The Talk," 1 John 3:1-7, *MinistryNow.com*

^{vi}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 27:2 April, May, June 1999, 50.

^{vii}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 27:2 April, May, June 1999, 49.

^{viii}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 27:2 April, May, June 1999, 49.

^{ix}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 27:2 April, May, June 1999, 49-50.

^xSteve May, "Walk The Talk," 1 John 3:1-7, *MinistryNow.com*

^{xi}Steve May, Illustrations, *MinistryNow.com*, adapted.