

Harvest of Hope

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on Stewardship Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

November 12, 2017

Text: Matthew 9:35-38

I don't know about you but these days I feel like my whole life is filled with wild things. Every time I turn on the news or listen to the radio I hear about all those wild things out there, roaring their terrible roars, gnashing their terrible teeth, rolling their terrible eyes and showing their terrible claws. Their terrible roars fill the news with horrific stories of violence perpetrated by troubled individuals and misdeeds done by people in positions of power. Then those same leaders gnash their terrible teeth about how they're trying to do something but someone or something just won't let them for whatever reason. So we find ourselves rolling our terrible eyes at yet more horrific stuff we can't do anything about – from natural disasters and their aftermath left unaddressed to manmade horror stories about church shootings and significant environmental issues side-stepped. Everyone on all sides of every issue then just seems to end up showing their terrible claws to each other and we get precisely nowhere in solving the urgent problems pressing in all around us.

Like Max we find ourselves on a frightening island of our own making sometimes. And I, for one, love Max's solution. He embraces the wild things. He calms them down by staring right

into all their yellow eyes without blinking once. Then he plays with them. They have so much fun together that the wild things don't want Max to leave. The interesting thing is that Max left to go back home because he realized being the king of all wild things just wasn't as much fun as he thought it would be. He missed being somewhere where people loved him best of all. So, he found his way back home where his supper was waiting for him in his room, and it was still hot.

This story has been beloved of children for generations and it's easy to see why. It captures beautifully a child's emerging desire to be different from parents at the same time that he/she realizes powerfully how much they need and love their parents. If we're honest we can see ourselves in Max as he makes mischief of one kind and another in his wolf suit, so much so that he ends up being sent to his room without supper. This happened to me once when I was little, maybe 6 or 7. I could not tell you if my life depended on it what I had done to be sent to my room without my supper but I do remember the no supper part. And I also remember supper showing up in my room eventually, still hot. What I remember most about that whole long incident is that love triumphed in the end. For me and my mom, love mattered more than any roaring and gnashing of teeth, more than any eye rolling and baring of claws which I am confident made some sort of appearance in this long ago incident I can't remember. And, that

dear friends, is the whole point. Love matters more than anything else that tries to disrupt love and send it running to far away islands. Love matters more than arguments and disagreements. Love matters more because people matter more than whatever they end up fighting about. But this is so very, very difficult to remember, to hold on to, in the heat of roaring and teeth gnashing and eyeball rolling and claw baring. In the heat of those angry moments in life, and we all have them, we lose sight of love. We lose sight of hope. We lose sight of the person behind the arguments. We lose sight of each other. And, worst of all, we lose sight of God.

This situation is exactly where this morning's text from Matthew picks up. Jesus and the disciples are in the midst of their ministries with the people and by now his reputation is such that people are flocking to him whenever they know he is in the area. Matthew tells us, "when Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus knew that the people were overwhelmed by the forces they had to contend with in their lives each day. He knew that there were surrounded on all sides by roaring, teeth gnashing, eyeball rolling, claw baring realities that kept the people poor and sick and overwhelmed. Just living was a challenge and Jesus saw this and wanted to make it better. Jesus wanted the people to know that God understood their anger and

frustration and God wanted things to be better. Jesus wanted the people to rediscover hope and regain their strength and their joy for living each day, in spite of all the difficult things they faced. That's why he turned to his disciples and said, "the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." There is plenty for us to do here for these people, he was telling the disciples, but we're only 13 people. So, what can we do? Lucky for them, and for us, Jesus had an answer: "ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." In other words, Jesus told the disciples to pray for more help. Jesus told them to go out and find more help for all the work to be done to make God's harvest of hope accessible to as many people as possible. More laborers, we need more laborers, Jesus told them. And he's telling us the very same thing.

"The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." That is as true for the church today, more than 2000 years later, as it was when Jesus first said it to the disciples. The work of the church is indeed multiplied these days because of the sheer magnitude of the people involved in life each day. We know this. All we have to do is turn on the television for 10 minutes and we are inundated with stories of the world's great need – refugees in need of new homes as they flee from war and famine and disease; weather refugees fleeing from the destruction of their island home of Puerto Rico; unrelenting violence from terror attacks using almost anything including trucks and bombs and guns as weapons for the

sole purpose of killing as many people as possible and terrifying the rest. This is our field of possibilities where the harvest of hope we in the church have to offer is so desperately needed. Indeed, this harvest of hope is God's great gift to us which is intended to define our days and our lives. It is a hope made tangible in the person of Jesus and all that he taught us through the life he lived among us. It is a hope empowered by the Holy Spirit *through us* to make a difference, however small, in the lives of the people we encounter each day.

The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. This is our charge from Jesus to a life lived in response to the gift of God's grace to each us, the grace which is the foundation of our hope, our belief, that a better world is possible and waiting for us if only we are willing to do the work to get there. This, dear friends, is the work of the church. This is the call of the church. This is our call as God's people in *this* church. But, we are a small church, we think. What can we do? The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. So true. But then, look at what we've already done. Our church is well known in the community as the place where extravagant hospitality for all is alive and well. Our church is known for our extraordinary mission outreach through our support of the WARM Center and the PNC. Our church has won awards from the United Church of Christ for our faithful support of national offerings like the Neighbors In Need offering being

received next week. These are offerings where monies donated make a real difference in the lives of real people, with administrative costs kept to a bare minimum. Our church testifies to our faith in God's hope that a better world is possible through our Pollinator Garden project as well as through the use of our building by groups like the twelve step groups that call our church home. Dear friends, we show the world we know the harvest is plentiful, the work to be done for God's people matters, just by being here on this corner doing what we do from week to week.

But the laborers here are few. That's just reality. We are a small church, a vital one for sure, but small as in not crammed with people. Most churches are not filled to the rafters these days and the ones that are don't tend to stay that way over time. Even some of the big mega-churches of yesterday are shrinking or giving way to yet another mega-church with a "new and different way" of being church. Such is the reality of church in the 21st century. But, the thing is the church is always supposed to be about the harvest Jesus describes. It's always supposed to be about the people we can reach with our message of hope and possibility and God's endless, boundless love for each and every person. The church, dear friends, is about the work of harvest and we do this work with however many hands we have.

That right there – doing God's work with what we have – is why this Stewardship Sunday in our church matters so much. The

church has work to do and bills to pay and that takes resources of all kinds. It takes human resources in the form of staff and volunteers willing to share their precious time and talents as we engage in the work God places before us in the community. It takes financial resources too. That's why we have pledge cards. Pledge cards are just your best guess of what you can do to support the church financially in the year ahead. The numbers they hold are not a binding contract. They are a best guess estimate of what you hope to be able to do to support the church financially in the year ahead. What you *hope* to be able to do, what you'd like to be able to do, not the safest amount you're comfortable offering. Your pledge to our church is an expression of your hope in what is possible for us to accomplish as we work together to do what God needs us to do with and through this church. And your support through your gifts of time, talent and treasure is what makes that possible. Period. End of discussion.

In a few moments we will be asking you to place your pledge cards for the year ahead in the offering plate where they will be retrieved and tallied at the end of the service. The results will be announced at this morning's Stewardship Brunch. Let's make that tally one that is filled with hope in God's future in this place. Let's focus on the plentiful harvest God needs us to address. Let's dare together to stretch into a future where the wild things have calmed down and new life is emerging, in and out of weeks and

over a year sailing across a sea of hope to the new world God envisions. The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few but we're here and I know we can continue to do amazing things because this, our church, is an incredible, extraordinary community of faith. I know we're up to whatever God places before us as work for the harvest of hope. I'm ready to move forward. How about you? Amen.