The text for the sermon this morning is written in the second verse of the tenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke: "The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few – pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest."

Those words are particularly appropriate for the feast of St. Luke. We remember him as the Evangelist who gave us both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, and the Collect remembers him as "Luke the Physician," inspired to set forth in the Gospel the love and healing power of Christ. – But today's Gospel reminds us that Luke did not merely write about the mission of the Church–he became part of that mission himself. He traveled with St. Paul, shared in his labors, and remained beside him even when those labors had become difficult and dangerous.

And the words our Lord gives us today are striking because Jesus does not say that there is no harvest. – He does not look out upon the world and say that people are hopelessly uninterested – that nobody wants to hear – or that there is simply nothing left for His Church to do. – He says exactly the opposite: "The harvest truly is great."

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The shortage is not in the harvest – it is in the laborers. – And that is worth thinking about – because it is very easy for churches to convince themselves that the problem is always somewhere outside – of us. – We think that people just don't go to church anymore. That society has changed. That Sunday mornings compete with a thousand other things. That people do not understand the Faith. That people are suspicious of organized religion. And while all of those things may contain some truth – none of them gives us permission to conclude that there is no harvest.

There are still people carrying grief who do not know where to take it. – There are people who have done things they deeply regret and do not know that forgiveness is possible. – There are people whose lives look perfectly successful from the outside – but who are searching for meaning. – There are people who have drifted away from the Church and wonder whether they would be welcome back. – There are people who have never really known Christianity beyond whatever impression they picked up from television, politics, or something they heard years ago. – And there are people who may not presently think they are looking for Christ at all – but Christ may already be looking for them.

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Yesterday, some of us had a very practical opportunity to put ourselves in the middle of that harvest at Centreville Day. On the surface, of course, we were there for a bake sale. We had hotdogs and cookies and other things to sell, and there is nothing wrong with raising some money while we are there. – But if all we were doing was selling baked goods, we could probably find easier ways to do it.

The more important reason for being there was simply that the people were there. People from the community walked past our church. Some walked into our church. – Some stopped, some talked, and some may have learned for the first time that our parish exists. – A conversation that lasts two minutes may not seem very significant – but for someone who later begins thinking about returning to church, facing a crisis, looking for a place to pray, or wondering what Christianity really teaches, that brief encounter may be the first connection.

Yesterday we were not simply selling cakes and cookies – we were putting ourselves where the people are.

And I want to thank everyone who helped make that possible, whether by baking, helping with preparations, working the bake sale, or simply spending time talking with people from

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the community. – My hope is that next year we can have even more of our parish family participate. Not simply because there is work to be done, but because opportunities like this allow us to introduce ourselves to people who might otherwise never know we are here. And we never know what might come from a friendly greeting, a brief conversation, or a simple invitation to visit our church.

Of course, we cannot know what God may do with those encounters, nor can we expect every conversation to lead someone through the doors of our church. – Our responsibility is to make ourselves available and allow God to work through the opportunities He gives us. And perhaps that helps us understand why, in today's Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples, "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest." Prayer comes first. The mission belongs to God, and the harvest belongs to God. We are not building our own kingdom or trying to manufacture results by our own cleverness.

St. Augustine, preaching on this very passage, reminds his hearers that the harvest belongs to God and that even the strength to labor comes from Him. The disciples were not being sent out to carry out Christ's work by their own strength – they were being called to share in the work He had already begun.

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But there is something almost humorous about what happens next. Jesus tells these disciples to pray that God will send laborers – and then He sends them.

Sometimes the answer to our prayer for more laborers is that Christ turns around and says, "All right – now you go." – We may pray that God will send someone to accomplish a particular work, only to discover that He has placed the opportunity right in front of us. – And perhaps that is a useful question for each of us: Where has Christ already given me an opportunity to make Him known?

But we also need to understand what kind of laborers Jesus sends. He says, "Behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves." That hardly sounds like a winning strategy by worldly standards. – Lambs do not intimidate anyone, they do not overpower anyone, and they certainly do not force anyone to listen.

And when the disciples enter a house, their first words are not an argument or a threat. Jesus tells them to say, "Peace be to this house."

That tells us something very important about Christian evangelism. – We are not called to harass people into church. We do not have to corner strangers and force them into theological

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discussions, nor do we need to treat every person who walks in our bake sale as a potential recruit. We are called to bear the peace of Christ, and to let His love become visible in the way we treat others.

Sometimes evangelism begins by smiling at someone and saying hello. It can mean answering a question without being defensive – listening to somebody's story – explaining who we are – offering an invitation – or simply allowing someone to encounter a Christian who is genuinely kind. That may sound small – but the Kingdom of God has always done a remarkable amount of its work through small things.

There is another detail in the Gospel that I think is particularly important. – St. Luke tells us that Jesus sent the seventy "into every city and place, whither he himself would come." The disciples were not being sent to take Christ's place. They were going ahead of Him, preparing the way for His arrival. – Their task was not to draw attention to themselves, but to help others receive the One who was coming after them.

And that remains the purpose of Christian evangelism. – We are not trying to make people impressed with us, or even with our particular parish. We are trying to introduce them to Jesus

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Christ. If our conversations, invitations, and acts of kindness help someone take even a small step toward Him – then something worthwhile has been accomplished.

St. Luke himself gives us a beautiful example of that kind of faithfulness in today's epistle lesson. In it he knows that his life is drawing toward its end as he writes, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." Then he tells Timothy that Demas has forsaken him, others have gone elsewhere, and finally he says simply, "Only Luke is with me."

St. John Chrysostom, commenting on those words, says that Luke remained closely attached to Paul, describing him as devoted to labor and learning, and as a man of courage. – There is nothing particularly dramatic about the sentence "Only Luke is with me," but perhaps that is precisely why it is so powerful.

Luke stayed. He was there. When Paul was traveling and preaching, Luke was there. When the mission was exciting, Luke was there. – And when Paul was imprisoned and facing death, Luke was still there.

Sometimes the work of the harvest looks like preaching to a crowd. – Sometimes it looks like writing a Gospel that will proclaim Christ for two thousand years. – Sometimes it looks like

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traveling to a new city. – And sometimes it looks like simply standing beside another Christian when nearly everyone else has gone.

That brings us back to the Collect, which speaks of the "love and healing power" of Christ and asks that the same power and love may be manifested in His Church for the healing of our bodies and souls.

That love and healing power is what the Church has been entrusted to carry into the world. – We are not inviting people to church simply because we want more names on a parish list. – We are not trying to fill pews merely so that we can say the parish is growing. We want people to meet Jesus Christ – to know His mercy – to hear His Word – to receive His grace – to find forgiveness for sin – and to discover the life that only He can give.

That is the harvest. – And it is important to remember that we do not control the results.

Someone we met yesterday may visit next Sunday. – Someone may visit six months from now. – Someone may never come here at all – but perhaps a kind encounter with Christians will remove one small obstacle that had kept that person away from Christ. – St. Paul elsewhere reminds us that one person

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plants, another waters, but God gives the increase. We usually do not know which part of that process God has given us, and we may never know what eventually comes from a simple act of kindness or invitation.

Our responsibility is not to guarantee the harvest – our responsibility is to be faithful laborers. – And so perhaps Centreville Day gives us something larger to think about than whether the bake sale was successful. – It reminds us that opportunities to share the Faith are all around us, sometimes in places and circumstances we might not ordinarily think of as opportunities for evangelism. – As we look toward next year, I hope more of us will consider how we might take part in those opportunities. After all, the work of the harvest takes many forms, and each of us has something to offer.

Not everyone will do that in the same way. Some will be comfortable talking with strangers. Others will bake something, set up tables, hand out information, pray faithfully for the work, welcome a visitor when that visitor finally arrives, or simply notice the person standing alone at coffee hour and go speak to him. – And some of the most important work may happen in the ordinary conversations we have with friends, neighbors, and coworkers throughout the week.

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The harvest truly is great. Christ said so. And the Church has been given both the privilege and the responsibility of taking part in that work – not because Christ cannot accomplish His purposes without us, but because He has graciously called us to share in His mission.

We celebrate St. Luke today because he answered that call. He devoted his time, his abilities, and his life to the service of the Gospel. Through his faithfulness – both in the Gospel he wrote and in the companionship he offered St. Paul – countless generations have come to know the love and healing power of Jesus Christ.

We may never write a Gospel or accompany an apostle on his missionary journeys – but we can be faithful where God has placed us. We can pray for the harvest – welcome the stranger – offer encouragement to someone who is struggling – invite someone to worship – and let the love of Christ be seen in the ordinary circumstances of our lives. – And perhaps the prayer we need today is not simply, "Lord, send more laborers." Perhaps it is also, "Lord of the harvest, make me willing to be one."

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