



A Harvest of Rejoicing; John 4:30-38

Baccalaureate Sermon

Delivered by Rev. Dr. Dianne Reistroffer

**Director of Field Education and Methodist Studies
and Professor of Ministry, Louisville Seminary**

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This is the day that God has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

This is indeed a time of celebration. When the members of the Baccalaureate Committee invited me to preach on this joyous occasion, they shared two special texts: the call narrative of Isaiah, and Jesus' call to the disciples to join him in mission to the world. I decided to focus on the Gospel reading, which serves as an interesting interlude between the stories of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well and the people's response to her testimony that led to their seeking out Jesus. Turning to the text, we find the disciples meeting up with Jesus and urging him to eat. In language similar to his conversation with the woman about water, Jesus tells them: "I have food to eat that you don't know about." Thinking someone may have made a food run on Jesus' behalf, the disciples say among themselves: "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus informs them that his food is to do God's will and to complete God's work. In quintessential Johannine fashion, food has become a metaphor for Jesus' divine commission. Then Jesus turns to the agricultural scene around him and speaks of the fields, of sowing and reaping, of the ripening harvest, and of the partnership between Jesus and the disciples. Of course, the spiritual harvest to which Jesus alludes is represented later by the "many Samaritans ... who believed the woman's testimony and came to Jesus and asked him to stay" (vv. 39-40).

The power of this narrative is obvious for those of us who share in the work of ministry, for we are both sower and reaper, and in God's own economy and time, we labor as one and we rejoice together. At the same time, we also build on the labors of others, and thus enter into their labor, with the ground already well-cultivated and tended. Today we celebrate a harvest of rejoicing, a harvest of great fruitfulness and promise in you, the Class of 2014. Many laborers – your families, your friends, your mentors, your teachers, your communities of faith – have been a part of God's good work in you. We rejoice together that you responded to the call to come to seminary and to dedicate your lives to the service of God, the church, and the world. We rejoice in this talented, gifted class, marked by outstanding academic achievement, creative and giving spirit, and pastoral-prophetic excellence. Indeed, without a doubt, you as individuals and as a class have not waited for graduation to be engaged in ministry. A goodly number of you served as pastors and in other work throughout your years of seminary study. Examples of your amazing ministry abound – from church planting to church relocation, community action, global and local activism, mediation services, seminary governance, teaching, and pastoral care. Friends, you came to this Seminary as gift, and after additional cultivation in academic fields and contextual education, you leave behind a distinctive legacy and a harvest of rejoicing.

This class also symbolizes a harvest of rejoicing for Louisville Seminary. Our passage from John refers to "four months" as the expected interval for the cultivation of the harvest. Understood symbolically, the interval between seedbed and harvest time can be brief or long. The Class of 2014 is in another respect a harvest of rejoicing for this institution, for which the interval between planting and yielding has been long and hard-fought. I recall a time in my own seminary journey when I was the only woman student in three of my classes. A few of us on the faculty remember a time when only one other woman was our teaching colleague. Could Dora Pierce, the first woman graduate of this seminary, scarce imagine that her pioneering step into theological education would yield a

graduating class at LPTS that would be two-thirds women? When in 1950 the president, the faculty, and the students of Louisville Seminary welcomed the first African American student, Snowden Isaiah McKinnon, in defiance of state-mandated segregated higher education, did they ever envision a time when Louisville Seminary would graduate a class comprised of one-third students of color and grant Certificates in Black Church Studies in a number that exceeds those of all but one degree program? Could the founders of the Women's Center and the More Light chapter on this campus have understood the liberating effect of their witness that would lead to the recognition and empowerment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students, graduates, and seminary employees, thus freeing them to study and serve openly? Much seed work, cultivation, weeding, and even crop failure have marked the past decades of the seminary's history, and those of us who have lived long enough to see both the sowing and reaping of these fruits of justice humbly acknowledge that we who rejoice in this moment stand on the shoulders of generations of administrators, board leaders, faculty members, staff, and students who labored before us, never forgetting that all along the way, God's prophetic spirit accompanied them. The great "cloud of witnesses" invites all of us to continue in that labor, and the Holy One of the Harvest, the Alpha and the Omega, reminds us that in the work of justice, there is much sowing and reaping yet to be done!

This last point leads me to another harvest of rejoicing for the church and for the world. As Jesus exhorted the disciples in John 4:35, so now he invites you, the Class of 2014: "Open your eyes and look at the fields!" The waiting time is over, enter the fields before you, roll up your sleeves, and do God's work. The church and the world are waiting for you and your gifts and graces, and if our preliminary placement reports are accurate, most of you are ready to go: "Here I am, send me!" The majority of you are going to be pastors in congregations; others are headed to chaplaincy and CPE residencies; several are planning to be therapists; one of you is serving in community ministry alongside persons struggling with homelessness and HIV/AIDS; another is off to Hannover, Germany to work with the World Communion of Reformed Churches; still another is entering campus ministry; a few of you are contemplating bi-vocational ministry; and three of you are pondering doctoral studies. What a harvest of rejoicing you represent to the church and to the world!

I have one final point: In her commentary on the Gospel of John, Gail O'Day underscores the significance of Jesus' mission to the Samaritan woman and the Samaritan people as a mission to "the other," noting that John 4 bears the only New Testament evidence of a Samaritan Mission during Jesus' ministry. Friends, you have learned in this place to see "the other" and to take care of the stranger. "Open your eyes and look at the fields!" It's sowing time; it's cultivating time; it's reaping time. You are sent as part of God's continuing ministry, to see and to serve "the other," to speak truth, to do justice, and to walk humbly with your God and your co-laborers. In so doing, we who rejoice with you this day are "confident of this, that the one who has begun a good work among you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).