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The Rev Barbara Ballenger Showing up as Jesus

How many of you have been following the World Cup games? I'm not a big one for sports, as you probably know. But there is something about these games and what they represent that goes beyond what the rest of the world calls football, and we call soccer.

I'm struck by the power of representation. We are getting a taste of the global, as members of the world's nations walk through our doors and introduce us to their food and culture, to their teams, to their cherished sport, to the ways they celebrate, whether they win or lose. It's an ironic moment for this international display in the life of our country. I find it a welcome, alternative to the story that has scorned the foreign born, the visitor, the immigrant and refugee.

It's not lost on me that this internationalism requires a very expensive ticket, that this is also a show of how global wealth is distributed. Players and referees have also been the target of embarrassing exclusionary policies on the part of our leaders. This time of global celebration has not stopped policies, such as the ending of Temporary Protected Status for millions of asylum seekers.

But there is a story at play here that pushes against that. I'm thinking of Haiti's which had a short but inspiring tenure in these games – it's first in more than 50 years. A country whose reputation has been reduced to its political failings, disasters and economic collapses raised a team from its diaspora, only one player on the team still lives in Haiti. It's not a simple, underdog story[1] – many of its members left the country as children talented in the sport and were formed by the countries that benefitted from their skills. Team Haiti was never able to even play on its own soil, but when it showed up at the World Cup it was Haiti, not second-generation Haitians or former Haitians. But Haiti – and in the spirit of the games it was able to represent itself on its own terms.

I tell this story of representation, because this is what today's Gospel is about. In these final verses of the 10th chapter of Matthew, we're at the end of a long lesson that Jesus has been teaching his disciples on how to represent him, and ultimately how to represent a loving, redeeming God in a world hungry for the Divine. It's a lesson that begins with a broken heart – with the deep empathy and compassion that Jesus experienced as he himself went about in the towns and villages preaching the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness (Matthew 9:35).

"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 laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:36-38).

[1] https://www.newyorker.com/culture/critics-notebook/the-world-cup-and-the-changing-psyche-of-the-haitian-diaspora See the The World Cup and the Changing Psyche of the Haitian Diaspora by Doreen St Felix in the June 13, 2026 New Yorker.

Chapter 10 of Matthew, the one we are finishing in today's lesson, is the answer to that prayer. Jesus' disciples are the laborers that they prayed to God for. Jesus sends them out to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons." And he also prepares them with the cold, unvarnished truth that this journey of love is one that will bring persecution and rejection, and division, the break up of families.

That's the risk. The joy is that when they bring that divine love into the places they go, what people will be receiving is God. After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the laborers will continue to do the work that Jesus started, and people will receive Jesus when they come to the door. They will receive what God has determined to give humanity through them.

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me," Jesus says.

These are instructions for us as well, if we have accepted Jesus' invitation to be his disciples who represent Jesus in the world. The Apostle Paul called it being Ambassadors for Christ.

That's what it means to be Jesus' disciple, and God's laborer at harvesttime. This is what it is to be the Body of Christ. We knock on the door, and the person who answers encounters Christ, and receives the good news and the divine healing that Jesus initiated in his earthly ministry. That's an immense responsibility. It requires a great deal of humility. And courageous. It will ruffle a few feathers, challenge the status quo. Dorothy Day, the saint who founded the Catholic Worker Movement called it, "Comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." This kind of discipleship can't be done with a spirit of perfectionism or self-righteousness or judgement. Only with the heart that breaks when it encounters people who are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

It's also not that hard to do, believe it or not. Here are four examples. I apologize if this embarrasses anyone, but it's for the good of the Gospel.

Mary Rivera equips herself with a stack of those little prayer squares that can be found in the basket near the St. Philip's Chapel, and she gives them out to everyone she meets. She invites them to come to St. Peter's on Sunday, and tells them that that little quilted or crocheted square is a reminder that we're praying for them. Those little squares represent the loving work of the St. Peter's Purlers, who meet regularly to create and assemble them.

Linda Toia moved to Baltimore last year, but still continues her work leading our Guatemala Committee, and our Listening Circles. You may have heard her speak about hope in our forum last week. Linda represents us to our partners in Guatemala in regular conversations – you'll hear their names in our Prayers of the People. They use the resources we send to minister to the needs of the people there. Lately the work in Guatemala has come to include welcoming our immigrant neighbors who have been deported back there.

Rick Pearce is a Third Order Franciscan, who has shaped his prayer life and spirituality around the example of St. Francis and St Clare. His order is bringing much needed aid to Cuba by sending it to the

Third-Order members who are located there. Rick has invited us to support that work. You can read about it in the parish newsletter.

Charlese, our parish administrator, makes it a point to gently acknowledge and greet people when she encounters them at our food cupboard and community fridge. If they are willing to share, she welcomes and listens to their stories. That's how she learned that some Haitian families in the area were part of a Biden-era program that encouraged them to house immigrants with the help of federal support. With that support now gone, many are relying on food cupboards like ours to continue the care. That's why they often leave with several bags of groceries. Charlese encourages them to take all they need.

Sue Gordon's mother had a practice of sending cards to people who needed a lift or a word of encouragement, and in her memory Sue started St Peter's card ministry. With the help of a volunteer or two, she keeps close track of our birthdays and anniversaries as well as those who are sick, who've lost a loved one, are going through a rough patch. There are some folks that she writes to every month, so they know that our community is praying for them and cares for them. Her cards represent us, and they deliver the love of Christ to their door.

Ask any one of these folks and they would likely say that the relationships, the encounters and interactions bring their own reward, which in turn sends them back for more. And I'm sure if you look at your own lives, you'll find similar examples in yourself and in the people you serve alongside.

Our Gospel today reminds us that it is not simply what we do for others that makes us disciples of Jesus, but how we show up, who we represent. We are asked to show up as Jesus. Not as Jesus the messiah or the savior, but Jesus the fellow laborer in the field., doing the work of his Abba.

If you keep reading on in the Gospel of Matthew from today's verses, you'll find what Jesus did next. The 11th chapter of Matthew begins: "Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities."

Today, the harvest is still plenty, my friends. The laborers are still few. And if we would pray to the Lord of the harvest to bring on more workers, we need to be ready to be part of God's answer to that prayer.

Amen? Amen.