

Compassion for the Harassed and Helpless
Matthew 9:36-10:1
Second Sunday After Pentecost
June 14, 2020
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Matthew 9:36-10:1 (NRSV)

³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

The Twelve Apostles

10 Then Jesus^[a] summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

I’ve told you I save scraps of paper with ideas on them.

One of them says, “what’s something I should ask the Family of Faith when we’re back together?” And there are a few questions listed.

The other day, listening to Christian radio I heard: “How have YOU been working with God, doing God-work during this safer-at-home time?”

IT was the gist of one of the scrap-of-paper-questions!

So, FAMILY OF FAITH – at both churches and “out there in cyber-church” – whatcha got?

I know *some* answers. But I want to hear from you.

Comment on today’s live stream. Or email me.

I mentioned, in my Pentecost sermon, that many of you have told me “just how good it feels” to do something for someone else.

Yes!

That’s working with God!

It’s a time we’re happy...we’ve forgotten about ourselves.

I see it as when many of us are focused on “being Jesus-like” for someone else.

Mask makers and prayer shawl crocheters – we’re feeling it.

Food pantry stewards, I know you feel it.

One of the “perks” of being pastors is answering the phone...too often from folks who need to ask for help...maybe for food assistance or help with utilities or gas money.

Some of the voices on the phone sound desperate – and they’re just asking for help.

I’ll tell you it IS gut-wrenching when I can’t or our pastor’s discretionary fund is shot for the month or someone standing beside me “just can’t” and I have to say “no.”

And I/we try NOT to become callous to the stories.

You’d be amazed though, at how gracious the callers are when I have to turn them down. “It’s okay. I’ll figure it out.”

And saying “I’ll pray for you” – sounds so trite.

Gut-wrenching. Heart-breaking. Because many times, those callers are the “harassed and helpless” – the ones that Jesus saw, mentioned in the verses that Pastor Gene just read for us.

And then, THANK GOD, I am blessed, when one of you shares YOUR story about how you were able to get a cup of coffee for the guy behind you in the drive-thru lane. Or a burger for someone.

I’m/we’re blessed and our hearts don’t hurt so much.

Pastor Gene and I aren’t alone, in this regard, as clergy. Our clergy AND laity friends share the same reports of calls and not *always* being able to respond the way the callers are hoping.

There is, like Jesus saw (I’m sure he felt it) the hopelessness and sadness AND even desperation.

What chance is there in a world where so many have so much....

...and so many more have so little?

There isn’t enough sharing going around.

The last couple of weeks have brought issues like this to the forefront of our need to be more aware and give more effort....because we HAVE and we CAN.

There IS contrast, economically, racially, TOO MANY ways...and the contrast has led TOO MANY to do dangerous and drastic things.

TO be clear: I am not giving license to people who are the looters we've been seeing on TV. They're stealing and THAT comes with judgement. It's one of God's BIG 10.

I'm talking about the ones WHO AREN'T on TV – in our country and across the world, who don't have enough...and they're "distressed and dispirited"...as one Bible translation says of Matthew's verse.

BUT GOD! Amen?

God has a special interest in the poor and hurting.
What's more, God expects us to share that interest.

Pastor Gene shared his Trinity Sunday message last week.

One of the ways we can *wrap our heads around* the *boggling concept of Trinity* is to remember that God is love...and Jesus IS a manifestation of God's love...and the Holy Spirit HELPS US TO DO WHAT GOD IS – LOVE; what Jesus did – LOVE.

The image of a loving God, Savior and Spirit, helps us answer the "age old" question: "What would Jesus do?"

HE. WOULD. LOVE. FIRST.

(I didn't make this up – the tshirts and bracelets are out there ready to be purchased.)

The Bible has more than 300 verses about people who call themselves followers of Jesus, (that's US) and our responsibility to care for the poor and work for justice.

One commentary did the math: That's, in the NT, about 1 out of every 16 verses!

Since the Bible gives the subject so frequent mention, shouldn't we be having more *positive* focus to address poverty? More of us actively involved?

I'm talking more action than platitudes here!

Perhaps, the Holy Spirit, which IF IT BLOWS AMONG US AS HARD AS THE WIND BLEW LAST WEEK, is moving among us, blowing hard, trying to get our attention,

and causing us to be more aware, to move us even (like the limb that broke out of the tree just outside the door)...

...moved to be BROKEN so we are CHANGED and different than before the Spirit blew so hard.

The media and the church bring the subject of poverty to light, but then politics worms in and there's way too much time spent arguing and judging and deciding who's in and who's out.

AhhhUUUUUGHGHGHGHG!

Let's find the glory in this gloomy circumstance!

In today's reading, we get a glimpse of what motivates **Jesus** to **do** what **Jesus** **does**.

He's been teaching and preaching and healing.

And we are told that when Jesus "saw the crowds", when he looked AND SAW (there's a difference) the faces of the people, "*he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*"

"Harassed and helpless" invokes, at least for me, a picture of a predator and its prey, where the prey is continually mangled by the predator until it gives up trying to escape and lies down and takes it.

And what is Jesus' response to this crowd of humanity in great need?

We read: "*He had compassion on them.*"

One definition of compassion is "a feeling of deep sympathy even sorrow for the plight of another." When we take that further we can add "when someone feels compassion, they really want to help."

Compassion, Dear Ones, is the opposite of indifference, because it prompts us to act.

When we are helping someone in need we are "showing them compassion."

'nother scrap of paper; this one in my journal...

It's about a place called, The Table, in Louisville, Kentucky.

The Table is a place where a UM pastor and his wife created *community* one meal at a time, in an urban neighborhood that seemed to be forgotten by city development. Most folks had moved to the suburbs.

The ministry serves affordable meals (sometimes that means, "you don't have to pay if you can't") made up of nutritious ingredients – coming from community gardens like our own West Side Cares organization encourages.

The diners (might be homeless or a downtown CEO) who are as mismatched as the tables and chairs they sit at to eat, enjoy meals together...meals and conversation...does that ring a bell? FOOD AND FELLOWSHIP, *remember*: like we talked about on Pentecost.

There are other "ministries" like The Table and can't you envision a time of breaking bread and sipping juice in a celebration of Holy Communion at a table like this?

Ministries are out there...and they are counteracting the notion held by, especially our brothers and sisters living on the streets, that hand-outs, hand-me-downs and left overs are "all that I deserve." That's what they're thinkin'.

Couldn't we all sit at tables with those who need to come and eat?

The Table's motto says, "This isn't a ministry where the "haves" help the "have nots... we're a ministry that acknowledges that we have privileges AND we can also acknowledge that we ALL have need."

That's an example of having compassion for persons who are food insecure.

But, let's also remember that while some of us have hunger in our bodies; others come with a hunger in our souls.

I don't think that Jesus looked at the crowd that day, when he saw people "harassed and helpless" and ONLY saw the hungry and folks down on their luck. I think that some of the most unhappy and miserable and angry people in our world are some of the most privileged.

We live in a lost and broken world. And Satan IS our enemy.

The apostle Peter wrote [Satan] “*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” (1 Peter 5:8)

Talk about predator and prey!

We’re being preyed upon.

Yes, even WE WHO ARE privileged.

And what makes us privileged?

Besides the things we have?

We’re privileged because we’re created in God’s image.

We are loved by God and God wants – HEAR THAT – WANTS to have a relationship with us.

God is present for all of us and wants to be active *right beside us* to care for the others God has created...also in God’s image!

God has given us all we have, including some very important jobs to do. We can’t miss out on that.

We’re told, in John’s gospel [10:10] that Jesus came to give us life, and not just life—but abundant life which will reveal itself when we are serving God and others.

That’s why doing something for someone else; having compassion for someone brings us such joy! We’re being fed spiritually.

We can agree, yes, that we have a very short stay on Earth in this life and we’re the ones who choose whether that stay will be joy-filled and rewarding or unhappy and wasted.

We’ve been fed by Jesus...we can feed others.

What’s more, when Jesus looked at that crowd He saw them not only like sheep without a shepherd but, also like a field of ripe wheat with nobody to harvest it.

They’re eager for God’s kingdom, but don’t know where to look to find it.

They’re ready and waiting for God to act, but who’s gonna tell them that God’s action has already started in Jesus Christ?

“Then [Jesus] said to his disciples, ‘*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*”

Other than the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus doesn’t often tell us what to pray for. But here He does.

“Go to the farmer,” (if you will, the farmer is God) “and beg him to send workers to bring in the harvest.”

And as we, Jesus’ followers, pray this prayer, the answer comes back that we’re the answer to the prayer!!!

Scientists can tell us that when the front of our brains get more active, like when we forget about ourselves and concentrate on God and projects bigger than we are, *neurochemical dopamine* is secreted and gives us a natural “high!”
Serving and caring for others *can give* us fulfillment like that – WHAT A JOY!

The “harassed and helpless” Jesus sees, aren’t just the “have nots.”
They’re also the “haves” who are living with a deep need for something greater than themselves.

But, when we get focused on Jesus...
...and become overwhelmed by God’s love,
...and learn to see others the way God sees us—we will live lives of active compassion where we’ll find ourselves in a good place that we wouldn’t trade for all the treasure in the world.

I believe...I know (we know) many of us are doing incredible things for the “harassed and helpless” in our community, neighborhood and yes, in our own families.

But, I have confidence that more of us could come onboard and do so much more!!!

Who can you invite? (put that on a scrap of paper to share with me)
How can you volunteer to help – especially when we’re able to relaunch our relaunch ministries?

What other ministries should we be offering that we don't currently have? (guess that's another scrap of paper!)

How can we better have compassion (be moved to act) for those who are across any kinds of chasm of our differences...

...and share the good news of God's Kingdom with our lost and broken world?

The harvest time IS NOW and workers are needed!

I pray/Pastor Gene and I are praying, that you're giving of yourself for God and other people OR ARE READY TO participate WITH GOD – and experience the natural high and the joy-filled **fun** there is in doing God's work.

Amen.