

# First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 9:35-10:8 (NRSV)

[35] Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. [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."

[10:1] Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. [2] These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; [3] Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; [4] Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

[5] These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, [6] but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. [7] As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' [8] Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

## THE CROWDS ARE COMING

What do you see when you look at our community? I think that our community is growing too fast. The crowds are overwhelming and growth is outpacing our infrastructure.

When I look at our community I am overwhelmed by how many people have decided to make Central Florida their home in the past few years. The road to my house used to be a pleasant tree lined drive. Now it is a crowded four-lane highway.

In fact, so many people are coming into our area; the price of housing has gone through the roof ... that is, if we're lucky enough to still have a roof after the hurricanes!

Our schools are overwhelmed by the influx of people. It seems that each year we open a new high school that is crowded on day one.

I remember when Florida Hospital at Celebration was having trouble getting a charter because people felt like there were too many empty hospital beds in our area. Now you're lucky to find a bed when you go to the hospital!

Our community has also grown in its diversity. When I arrived in this town over ten years ago, Central Florida was already a very diverse place. I had never heard so many languages and accents. And yet, the area has become even more diverse in the past few years.

In the face of all this change, there is a temptation to feel overwhelmed and even frightened. We worry that our quality of life will suffer; many of us have already started to feel like strangers in our own community. How do we deal with the crowds that are threatening to change our way of life?

#### CROWDS IN THE GOSPELS

Believe it or not, the Bible has a lot to say about crowds. In the Bible, Jesus is constantly portrayed as being in the middle of a crowd. I typed the word "crowd" into my computer concordance and found that the word is used 110 times in the gospels alone!

So what does Jesus say about the crowds that often hemmed him in on all sides? What did Jesus say about the multitudes? Did he view them as a hindrance to the accomplishment of more important kingdom matters?

Certainly we could have understood if Jesus had that kind of attitude. The crowds were often so needy that they followed Jesus wherever He went. The crush of the crowd was so great that on at least one occasion Jesus had to teach from a boat.

Jesus was so busy healing and teaching that sometimes He and His disciples couldn't find time to eat or sleep. Some people, including his family, thought that they were crazy to work so much. The Scripture teaches us that they couldn't go into towns openly because everyone wanted a piece of Jesus; they wanted to touch him so that they might be healed.

You may remember that on more than one occasion Jesus had to get up very early in the morning in order to have time alone to pray and meditate. But, even then the crowds intruded ... always wanting more of his time.

#### YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

Once Jesus and his disciples even attempted to avoid the crowds by taking a boat ride across the sea. Once across they then traveled farther into the wilderness. But, the crowds would not be denied. They even followed him into the wilderness on the other side of the sea. Jesus didn't complain; he just continued to teach and heal.

Finally, the disciples, noting that the hour was late, suggested that Jesus send the crowd away because there was no food in the wilderness. But, Jesus saw an opportunity for ministry instead of a problem. For Jesus the people were like "sheep without a shepherd."

He had compassion on them and told his disciples, "You give them something to eat."

And miraculously 5,000 were fed.

#### SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

Today's passage is in that great tradition of "crowd stories" so prevalent in the gospels. When Jesus looked at the people of his community, he was moved with compassion because they were harassed and helpless ... (or to translate it another way, wounded and lying exhausted) ... like sheep without a shepherd.

The image would have been very familiar to the people of Jesus' day. Quite often the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of Israel's unfaithful leaders as those who had scattered and abandoned the people. On account of their faithless ways, the people were like sheep without a shepherd.

But, the Old Testament prophets also offered hope for this harassed and helpless people. There would arise from the house of David a righteous Branch ... a new kind of king who would rule his people through the power of righteousness and justice. He would feed his flock and bring security to the Chosen people.

Jesus was the obvious fulfillment of that prophecy. Jesus was the Messiah who saw the people of his community as those who needed care and concern. He treated them with compassion. And like the story of the feeding of the 5,000, the disciples are given a call to do something about the needs of the crowd.

In this case, the disciples were charged to bring a message of healing and hope to God's people who lived in the surrounding area. The ministry of Jesus becomes the ministry of the disciples as they are charged to go and heal the sick, raise the dead and preach that the kingdom of God is at hand.

In other words, the disciples are once again charged to do things that are impossible in their own power. Only through the power of God would they be able to carry out this mission.

#### A GREATER CALL

In this particular instance, Jesus limited their mission to the people of Israel, but later ... after the resurrection ... Matthew's gospel tells us that the call was not so limited in scope. The disciples are charged to go into the whole world ... preaching, teaching and healing in the name of Jesus.

I firmly believe that this call to have compassion for the multitudes is still the call that Jesus gives his disciples today. He calls us to do things that we never thought were possible with people we have never

really known! Instead of fleeing from the crowd, we should be embracing them.

In John's gospel, after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples go fishing. They fish all night, but they catch nothing. Early the next morning a stranger on the shore bids them to cast their net on the "other side" of the boat. When the disciples do this, their nets are so full of fish that they are unable to haul them into the boat.

The stranger on the shore, of course, is Jesus, and according to almost every commentator, the big haul of fish is symbolic of the growth of the kingdom of God. You may remember that Jesus told the disciples that he would make them fishers of people. And the people understood that this "big catch" in response to the call of Jesus was a promise of success in their evangelistic efforts.

But, notice that the disciples had no success until they cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They had to try a different technique.

#### FISHING ON THE OTHER SIDE

When I was a delegate to the General Assembly several years ago, I roomed with a minister by the name of Ian Laing. Ian, at that time, ran a home for "street kids" in Philadelphia. He was consumed with compassion for those abused and abandoned children.

And Ian suggested that Jesus' command for the disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat is also a call for disciples today to cast their nets on the "other side of the tracks" ... to reach out with compassion and love toward those whom society considers "untouchable" and "beyond hope."

Indeed, it is from these "little ones" that we will see a great harvest for the kingdom of God. When you think about it, Jesus' entire ministry was a matter of casting the net on the other side of the boat ... sinners and tax collectors ... lepers and harlots ... Samaritans and common people formed the crowds that flocked to Jesus.

They are still in the crowds that would flock to Jesus. Who are the harassed and helpless in our world today? Could it be that those with AIDS represent modern day lepers? Could it be that the homeless who fill our streets? Could it be those who fill our prisons, having lost all dignity and self-respect? Could it be the tremendous variety of people who come to Central Florida each and every day looking for a dream and instead finding a nightmare?

The crowds do indeed press in upon us, and like those first disciples we are tempted to "send them away." We want to say, "They're spoiling our lifestyle. They are changing our way of life."

But, I think Jesus would have us see their time of need as an opportunity to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. Jesus calls us to

look with compassion upon the suffering of those who crowd in upon us and to do something positive to change that suffering.

#### COMPASSION

Compassion is our motive for ministry.

The Greek word translated "compassion" is a very strong word. We might say that Jesus had a "gut reaction" to the plight of the crowd.

One commentator suggested translating this passage, "his heart contracted convulsively at the plight of human need." In other words, Christ actually experienced physical pain because he was so concerned for the welfare of the crowd to whom he ministered.

Hal Luccock in a sermon on this passage said that there are some who would condense the gospel to one word. That one word would not be "compassion" but "relax." He said it was like abbreviating an 88 note piano into one note.

The gospel of this "feel good religion" would then go, "If any one will come after me, let him relax." Or, "Go out into all the world but don't go too far lest you raise your blood pressure."

This is certainly not the message of compassion to which Jesus calls us. More often than not his message raised everyone's blood pressure. Sometimes, instead of being a soothing balm, his words created tension and conflict.

Jesus cared enough about people to confront the injustices of the day. He had compassion for the multitudes. He cared for the people so much that he refused to look away from the needs of those who were hurting. And He made sure that his disciple would also look upon and respond to those needs.

#### KEEP LOOKING

Two commuters in the big city took a train to work. On the route, they passed through a blighted section of the city. Each day, as the train passed through the poverty stricken area, one of the commuters pulled down the shade on his window.

One day he thought he discerned disapproval in the eyes of his seatmate. He asked, "What would you have me do?" His friend answered, "I would have you leave the shade up and keep looking."

The call of Christ is a call to keep looking. We cannot pull the shade on the world's pain and sin and ugliness. We cannot act as if the crowd does not exist. We must see. We must see the hurt of the world with the eyes of compassion.

## THE PROMISE OF CHANGED LIVES

But, more than just looking, we must also believe that there is hope even in the most desperate of situations. We work for the Son of God who forgave sins, healed the sick, and raised the dead. He commissioned his first disciples to do the same.

If we are his modern day disciples, dare we give up on anyone?  
Dare we send anyone away?

When Jesus looked at the "harassed and helpless" crowds, he was moved to the depths of his being in compassion for them. But, he also saw promise.

He saw the possibility of a great harvest. He saw lives being changed by the power of God, and he saw that promise being fulfilled when individual believers were willing to go where they were called to go by their Lord.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to, "Ask the Lord of the harvest ... to send out workers into his harvest field." This is my prayer for us.

Suppose God answered that prayer. What would it look like?

## COMPASSION HAS A NAME

I think that our Scripture for today gives us a clue. The disciples who go out on a mission trip are named. Matthew tells us "the names of the twelve were ..." and then he names them. Why did he do that? I think he did it because he wants us to know that true compassion always has a name. Long ago the names were Simon, Andrew, James, John and even someone named Judas who would later betray his Lord.

You can still hear the disappointment in Matthew's voice as he writes about Judas, but Matthew did not leave Judas off the list. A disciple who is far from perfect can still be used on the Lord's mission trip. The power is not in the disciple but in Jesus, the disciple maker.

The names of those that Jesus calls have changed. Today Jesus calls people like Frank or Chris or Gene or Betsy or Linda ... or ... fill in the blank with your own name ... because you are called. You are called to the ministry of compassion.

## FEEL WITH

Compassion means to feel with someone who is hurting. Compassion means using your own pain as a way of understanding the pain of others.

In order to really communicate the gospel, we have to first recognize ourselves as a member of the crowd that Jesus described. We are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

The image is a vivid. Sheep have been attacked by wolves. Bleeding and broken with the wolves closing in from every side the situation looks hopeless. They have no shepherd for the flock has been scattered all over the countryside.

That's a powerful image to describe the panic and fear many of us have felt from time to time. It may be what some of us are feeling right now.

But, God in Christ comes to tell us that fear and panic will not have the final word. Through the ministry of Christ, we are included in God's loving family. His compassion has changed us and will continue to change us all our lives. His compassion even gives us hope for life beyond this life.

#### FREELY GIVE

Those of us who have heard this message have a special responsibility. We are charged to love others as Jesus first loved us. We are called to join with Jesus in the rescue of lost sheep. As Jesus told his disciples,

"Freely you have received. Freely give." (Matthew 10:8)

This is the attitude of the compassionate person. God has given me so much ... how can I not give to others? God has forgiven me. How can I not be forgiving toward others? The gospel really has been good news in my life. How can I keep silent about it when others need good news?

E. Stanley Jones told a story about a wealthy farmer who prayed out loud for a destitute neighbor. His little girl overheard the prayer and asked, "Daddy, why trouble God with that? You can give our neighbor what he needs."

I don't think that we trouble God when we pray for our neighbor in need. But, prayer always implies an openness to go and do something about that neighbor's need in God's name. It is a willingness to say, "Here I am Lord. Send me."

Are you willing to say that? Are you willing to say, "Here I am Lord. Send me?"

Freely we have received. Freely let us give.

Amen.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**