“Compassion”

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Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

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***Romans 5:1-8***

***5 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.***

***6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.***

***Matthew 9:35-10:8***

***35Then 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. 36When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”***

***10 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. 2These 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; 3Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; 4Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.***

***5These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, 6but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ 8Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.***

If I was looking for a job, and I saw a job description that said, “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” I would not apply. As a matter of fact, I think the twelve disciples named in today’s text from Matthew were actually victims of very thinly veiled bait and switch tactics. Clearly they had some trouble with the work. We know that the first disciples, Peter, actually ended up denying Jesus three times. Two others, Matthew and Simon held opposite beliefs about the Roman governing authorities – Matthew worked for them, and Simon a Zealot, worked against them. And we all know what happened to Judas. Time spent curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing people afflicted with leprosy, and casting out the demons that tortured the minds of some, can really affect a person.

When it comes to working for God, some people apply, others are chased down, and some get caught up in a moment and sign up because all of their friends did. The thing is, God accepts them all. Each gospel writer tells the story of the naming/calling of the twelve and the sending of the twelve differently. Those differences help us hear what God’s word might be to us for *this* day.

In Mark’s gospel, chapter 3, the apostles receive their commissioning and v.20 says “Jesus went home” (3:20). In Luke’s gospel, the apostles are appointed, Jesus prays overnight, and then all of them along with Jesus go down the mountain to begin the “sermon on the plain” (6:20-49). The actual sending of the “twelve” in Luke doesn’t come until chapter 9 later (9:1-6; cf. 10:1-24).1

What then is Matthew trying to tell us by putting the story in the way that he does?

As I read the Matthew text the word that stood out for me was “compassion.” Jesus had compassion for them. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them for they were harassed and helpless.” It’s as if Jesus was walking down Market St., or getting off Bart at the Civic Center, or walking amongst those at our southern border. They were harassed and helpless and Jesus had compassion for them.

Compassion is one of those words whose definition is kind of hard to pin down. Jesus saw the crowds and had nice thoughts about them. Jesus felt sorry for them. Jesus wished their situation was different. There are four words that often get used when one person sees another suffering. Pity, Sympathy, Empathy and Compassion.2 According to one source (cited in the written version)

*Pity* says, I acknowledge your suffering.

*Sympathy* says, I care about your suffering.

*Empathy* says, I feel your suffering.

*Compassion* says, I want to relieve your suffering.

I found many articles and sources about the differences between these emotional responses. They all varied a little from each other, but one thing they all had in common was that compassion motivates behavior. *Compassion moves one to act.*

“When Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them for they were harassed and helpless.” And that’s when he said the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. There’s lots of work to do, and not enough people. So he called these twelve by name, and commissioned them to help do the work. And he gave them instructions right there, and sent them off. Jesus’ compassion was not separated from action. The difference between Matthew’s version of this story and the other gospel writers, is the sense of urgency, the immediate action. One commentator suggested that agricultural metaphors don’t work so well for us anymore so he suggested a few others: He writes, “Maybe a sports metaphor: This game is winnable, but the really good players are few. Therefore, ask the coach to send more good players onto the field. Maybe we need a metaphor out of the familiarity of present-day urgencies. This burning house is salvageable, but the able firefighters are few, therefore ask the captain of the fire station to send more firefighters into the burning rubble.”3

What is the point of looking at these slightly different emotional responses to one’s suffering?

You can probably think of some reasons. For example, if we were to go on a ministry opportunity by walking the streets of the Tenderloin in the city, we would think of the words of Jesus when he called his disciples and sent them to help him do his work: Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion for them. Jesus didn’t have pity. Maybe sympathy, and even deeper, empathy. Jesus though, had compassion for them, and was moved to act. He called for help, and they all cured the sick, raised the dead, cleansed the lepers and cast out demons. Dr. Brene Brown points out that when someone tells us something about their suffering, and we respond with something like “at least….” She writes, “Rarely does a *response* make something better; what makes something better is connection.”

Jesus has always been about connections. When Jesus calls us and sends us out, any work we do toward God’s work in the world *must* be in a way that *connects* with the suffering. What better way to proclaim the gospel than to display that compassion that Jesus had? Make that connection, provide that healing, bring someone freedom.

Greg Carey writes, “Healing and liberation certify the presence of the realm of heaven. Both Jesus’ own mission and that of the Twelve bring not only proclamation but also healing. Jesus sends forth the Twelve to perform his own works, the very works that have defined his ministry from the beginning (4:23-25).”5

Basic kindness is in short supply these days. The urge to be right, the worry we have about not being up-to-date, our fear of being caught not knowing something stops us in our tracks sometimes. When something on the news makes us furious, we react with extremes – maybe rage, maybe an outburst, or maybe we shut down completely. When something breaks our heart, we might feel frozen, overwhelmed with emotion or maybe just worried we might do the wrong thing. Entering the fray is risky business.

This is the perfect time to lead with faith. Lead with love. Lead with grace. The more we practice being loving, being gracious, praying for others, allowing the time and space for God to come in and for us to recognize God’s presence in us – the more we practice these spiritual parts of our faith the more our initial reactions will come from a place in us where God lives. Because we, like the twelve, have been called, named, and commissioned for this work in the world.

Let us pray….

1Yuckman, Colin, Working Preacher Commentary, June 2020. (see Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13)

2<https://www.mmsworldwideinstitute.com/pity-sympathy-empathy-and-compassion/>

A close-up of hands holding a heart

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3Cleophus J. LaRue, Working Preacher Commentary, June 2023.

4RSA Shorts, Espresso for the Mind; Brene Brown on Empathy and Sympathy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

5Carey, Greg, Working Preacher Commentary, June 2008