

June 14, 2020
The Compassion of Christ
Annette Hill Briggs
Matthew 9:35-10:8

[The Harvest Is Great, the Laborers Few]

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."

[The Twelve Apostles]

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. 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.

[The Mission of the Twelve]

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.

Hey friends, as you probably have heard, a group of UBC folks is meeting to plan returning to in-person worship later in the summer. Doing our part to keep our congregation and our community as safe as possible is our first priority. We also really want to hear from you about gathering again. Hopefully, by now you've either filled out a survey or talked to your deacon about it. You are also welcome to call or email me if you have questions or thoughts to share. Whatever our return to in-person worship looks like, friends, we will continue to produce some version of online worship service every week for people who cannot join us on Sunday mornings. That said, let's pray together and then turn to the scriptures for today.

We pray for people the world over, O God, who call themselves – ourselves – the people of God. May we hear your voice above all others, directing our lives, focusing our vision, so that we see humanity as you see them, desperate for the compassion only you can give.

Find us at work in this world, O God, like people who have been moved by that same compassion, to live according to your word. Amen.

From Exodus 15, I want to pull one thread, from verse 5. The Israelites are a few months out of Egypt and have arrived at Mt. Sinai. Through Moses, God says to them,⁵ “Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.” *If you obey my voice and keep my commandment, you shall be my treasured people out of all the peoples.* This is one of the earliest biblical statements about what it means to be the people of God. The people of God are the people who do – what? Listen to, or obey, God’s voice.

Listen and *obey* are the same in our lingo, right? If a child doesn’t do what we tell her, we say she isn’t listening. People of God are people who listen to God and who keep God’s covenant. A covenant, mind you, they don’t even know yet. And yet, as Laura Beth read to us, the people agree, 100%. Why wouldn’t they? They don’t need to read the small print. The offer comes from the One who set them free. They are all in. But what else do we know about them? Listening turned out to be harder than they imagined. Keeping covenant, the same.

Two years later they haven’t moved ten miles, are on the verge of open rebellion, and God has set fire to their camp. *Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my people, the people of God.* This arrangement is warp and weft of the entire Bible story of God and God’s people: the people knowing what they are supposed to do, and being mostly incapable of doing it two days in a row. Jesus enters the story as Messiah, in the gospel of Matthew, chapters 8 and 9. He has been healing person after person. He looks up from that work and sees – what? Crowds more people waiting to be healed. “Harassed and helpless” is how Matthew describes them, “like sheep without a shepherd.” *Harassed and helpless*, especially the word *harassed*, has a very sheep-y meaning. It means *to be flayed open, as by a predator, a wolf maybe. Also torn, injured, crippled.*

The people Jesus sees aren’t just needy. They are mistreated. Abused. Unprotected. *Sheep without a shepherd.* “Sheep without a shepherd” is Matthew’s political nod, for the readers quick enough to catch it, to remember it from the prophet Ezekiel speaking of pre-exilic Israel, when God saw the people abandoned and abused by one corrupt king after another, calling them *sheep without a shepherd.* [Ezekiel 34]

God did not stand for it then. Jesus cannot stomach it now. *He was filled with compassion*, Matthew wrote. In English, “compassion” is a synonym of sympathy, pity or soft-heartedness. The Greek word has nothing to do with the heart, but rather the gut. Literally, *he was moved in his bowels.* We don’t like thinking Jesus had bowels. But I rather like the literal translation here, the idea that the sight of human beings beaten and

torn up by the predators of this world turns God's stomach, makes God sick – nauseating, gut-wrenching, nasty sick, right-down-to-the-very-pit-of-God's-self sick.

Once upon a time, before I actually ever had food poisoning, I thought I'd had it. I'd get a belly-ache, throw up a few times and then fall asleep. Sometimes I'd just lie really still and make it go away. And then I'd think, "Oh, I must have had a touch of food poisoning." Then two summers ago, I was flying to meet Carl for vacation. At the Detroit airport, I bought what turned out to be a poisoned sandwich. I ate it later on the plane. Later still, in the middle of the night in a hotel room in Seoul, South Korea, the poison in that sandwich poisoned me. The details I will not share, except to say that my body's singular purpose was to rid myself of that poison.

Invoking the literal translation of the Greek word for compassion as the *deep discomfort*, or *suffering* even, that comes with seeing his beloved sheep mistreated and abused – and seeing it, he himself suffers – brings it into new focus for me. Suffering, he must correct or relieve the cause of the suffering before he can proceed. He does not rename what he sees or what he feels. He does not turn away from what he sees. He sees it. He suffers. He must address it. He turns to his disciples and he says, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*"

This is a statement by the Jesus I call "the tricky Jesus," asking his disciples to pray God would send some workers, when he already knows who those workers are, and suggesting those workers will be gardening or farming. The workers are them. The work is not gardening. Our scripture reading for today stops at verse 8, but Jesus keeps talking, saying things about how they should watch out for predators who will be after them; *wolves in sheep's clothing*, he calls them. He talks about being dragged into court, being questioned and beaten; he talks about not being afraid of those who can only kill the body. I know gardening, friends. That's not gardening. There are no wolves in gardening, just stickers and chiggers. No wolves.

Jesus picks out twelve of the people listening, and here in Matthew we learn their names: Simon Peter and his brother Andrew; James and John, another set of brothers; Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas; Matthew, the author of this gospel; another James and another Simon; Thaddaeus and Judas Iscariot. Some fishermen, a tax collector, a doubter and a spy. Not a seminary graduate in the lot. Not a single credential among them, except that they listened; they heard him when he called their name. They could not possibly have been ready for what he was about to send them to do. They had only ever watched him at this business of healing other people. They go, not because they are ready, but because Jesus' compassion requires it. Compassion must be relieved. His compassion trumps their inexperience. It trumps their fear.

Matthew calls them *apostles*, his one and only use of the word, a word they themselves had never heard. *Apostle* means *one who is sent*. (It came to mean one who knew Jesus

personally and was sent by him.) They were sent exclusively to the lost sheep of Israel – a sermon in and of itself I wish I had time to preach. Sent with instructions to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God has come near; to bear witness to that kingdom in real time, in the most physical, hands-on ways: by curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, casting out demons, AND – maybe by the most outrageous instructions of all – by taking no payment for their services. If you want to be different from this world, Jesus says, do what you do for free.

As Matthew tells it, these newly-minted apostles trot off one way and Jesus another. Their partnership relieves his suffering. However convoluted his power became by their fear and inexperience, Jesus is relieved and, for the time being at least, he can proceed with his mission. The apostles for their part, go – to learn to see with his eyes; to feel with his gut, if you will; and to flex the power of his spirit within them and among them, to relieve the suffering this world inflicts.

My husband has taught in Korea every summer for years. After I'd been sick for a day and a half, he called up one of his former students who, along with her mother, came 'round to the hotel and collected my sorry self and took me to a clinic where my hero, Dr. Yoo, pumped me full of antibiotics and new fluids. Then they took me to the pharmacy for my medicine. Then they took me to a tiny porridge shop, and explained my predicament to the owner, who went to her kitchen and cooked up a bowl of chicken-y mush that felt like life flowing back into my body. In their way, the student, her Oma, Dr. Yoo, and the Oma who made my porridge, "raised me from the dead."

I don't think a "miracle" is necessarily or even usually a supernatural miracle, like the widow's son at Nain or the ten lepers on the border of Samaria. More often than not, I think it's just a whole lot of ordinary work that takes up a lot of time and sometimes costs a bit of pocket too. Remember the Good Samaritan? – remember the man who took two days out of his ordinary life and who-knows-how-much money out of his pocket to take care of someone he didn't even know?

The compassion of Christ may be a state of being in which we expect to be interrupted by the things God cares about, a state in which we are prone to see because we listen to God's voice and see with God's eyes. And seeing what God cares about, we aren't surprised when our bellies start to bubble. Can you imagine, friends, what kind of world this would be, what kind of church this might be, if the sight of human beings suffering stopped us in our tracks, made us so sick we could do nothing until we had relieved ourselves and relieved this world of it? Until we had obliterated the source of that suffering?

But, instead of relieving the suffering, I wonder if we haven't just relieved ourselves of the meaning of the words? Making *compassion* synonymous with *sympathy*? Or maybe even *pity*? And *soft-heartedness*? Because that allows us to feel bad and keep on walking. Allowing us to shake our heads and say a prayer, while staying focused on our

own business? And relieving the term *people of God* from any instructions that we consider too embarrassing, scary or inconvenient to obey. Even the word *obey* makes us more itchy than we want to be, doesn't it?

So what's the takeaway? That the compassion of Christ is somehow like a bad sandwich from the Detroit airport? That Jesus wants us to go over to Bloomington Hospital and start raising dead folks in the morgue? Head up to the 2nd floor, healing the ICU patients? That's not my ministry.

How about this: Jesus Christ has called his church to proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of God has come near, and that we proclaim it best when we move through this world seeing with his eyes, hearing with his ears, and feeling with his gut. What hurts him, hurts us. And what hurts the Lord is seeing his beloved sheep constantly flayed and crippled by the outright meanness this world not only inflicts, but tolerates and justifies. It hurts the Lord to see people helpless and harassed. And if we are his people, if we are listening to him, it hurts us too. Hurts us in a way that won't let us just keep living our lives and our life together as if nothing is wrong.

And listening isn't easy. Hurting over the things that hurt God isn't fun. But who said life was supposed to be easy or fun? Our privilege. Who else? Nobody. Not your mama and certainly not the Lord. The compassion of Christ may have us feeling anxious and scared sometimes, especially at the thought of getting closer to a person's pain or trouble and suffering, when we'd much prefer to get further away.

The thought might come: *That seems like something for the pastor to do; she seems better at this kind of thing.* Maybe. But if you are even having that thought, I suspect there's a good chance God means for you to step up. Why would God put on your heart what God means for someone else to do? And remember Matthew 10: Jesus calls people to do stuff they have no idea how to do, that they have not been trained for, and that they never imagined themselves doing. Their only credential is that they heard their name called when the Lord began to call.

So if you take the call, friend, the job is probably yours. And the job: it's the compassion of Christ. Let's pray.