

May 5, 2019

Jesus' Answer to the Prayer He Is Telling Us to Pray

Annette Hill Briggs

Matthew 9:32-38

³² After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. ³³ And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, "Never has anything like this been seen in Israel." ³⁴ But the Pharisees said, "By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons."

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."

Today we are looking in Matthew 9, laying it side by side with Matthew 28, which may have been Jesus' last word to his disciples – but not his only word – concerning the ministry to which he has called them.

Every sermon Jesus preaches is like a pizza we're all sharing. We take up our slices and spend the first ten minutes (or 2,000 years) picking all the olives off because, God forbid we eat what he serves. In Matthew 9, Jesus is preaching, teaching, and healing. Most folks listening love everything he says and does. A handful, the most religious in the bunch, don't. They call him "Satan's servant." *Doing the devil's work*, they say. Eventually, they'll say he's dangerous. And they won't be wrong. A Christ-like church is dangerous – preaching, teaching, and healing whatever folks come along.

Such a church is dangerous to an empire used to keeping its power by keeping folks helpless and harassed. Such a church is dangerous to organized religion too, if that religion hopes to stay cozy with the empire. All of which is to say, insofar as the Great Commission really is a thing, Matthew 9 is where it sings to me.

Let's pray, God of all life, that we might realize that all life is all one thing. The life that pulses in our hearts is the same which gives birds flight, the same which makes our food grow. Wherever life meets life, may we regard and treat it tenderly, reverently, gratefully... and always in your name. Amen.

Verse 4:23 through 9:38 might be called “Matthew’s Ministry Field Manual” – Jesus showing and telling what he wants the church to do and be. *Watch me. Listen to me. Then go, say, and do that.* What he does, chapter 4 to chapter 9, is preach, teach, heal. At the beginning and the end of the section Matthew says (it's practically verbatim), 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. Crowds gathered everywhere he went.*

Now I’ve no doubt Jesus was a good preacher, and everyone loves good preaching. But you and I both know it wasn’t the preaching drawing those crowds: it was the FREE healthcare. *He cured every disease and every sickness*, Matthew writes. Every single one was a pre-existing condition. Jesus never asked for prior authorization. No deductible to be met. “*Every disease and sickness brought to him*” is how the text reads.

The crowds were amazed. They marveled. Who wouldn't be? Cubans, maybe. Dr. Paul Farmer, of Partners in Health, says Cuba has the best healthcare system in the western hemisphere. You should read Tracy Kidder’s book about Dr. Farmer, by the way, called [Mountains Beyond Mountains](#). Citizens of countries with universal healthcare might not be as amazed as us that Jesus was a fan of universal health care. He healed every body; every disease; every sickness. The crowds marveled. Representatives of the religious establishment – not so much. They see the same thing and call Jesus “*Satan’s tool.*” Don't miss this. Don't miss religion saying out loud in their most religious voice that healing poor people is the devil's business, that relief from suffering, that human compassion, that common decency has nothing to do with the religion they represent.

The text records no direct reply – just moves the camera back to Jesus, staring at the crowds while we read his thoughts. *Harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* There is his reply. The religion which ought to protect and defend them, doesn't. Instead, religion is just another pack of wolves, in cahoots with the Empire, feeding on the weak and helpless. Matthew says it turned Jesus’ stomach. Actually, *stirred his bowels* is the closer translation for the word “*compassion.*” It's the pain of love – when other people's suffering hurts us.

In Jesus’ time emotions were thought to live in the gut. We say they live in the heart, but only because we think ourselves more polite. Don’t miss that what turns God's gut is a

two-part tragedy: his beloved sheep are so harassed and helpless; and his shepherds are allied with the wolves.

The shepherd metaphor was not born in the New Testament, nor first in reference to Jesus. All through the First Testament, the king of Israel was repeatedly called their shepherd – along with the prophets and the priests. Remember Ezekiel 34, a text I've sometimes preached at Thanksgiving:

Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd.... ⁶ My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill... with no one to search or seek for them. ...⁹ Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ¹⁰...I am against the shepherds; ... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed [my sheep] with justice.... ²⁷ They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord.... ²⁸ They shall no more be plundered for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. ²⁹...they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations.... ³¹ You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God. I, the Lord, have spoken.

Six hundred-and-eighty-five years, give or take a few, between Ezekiel and Jesus. Different empires. But God's sheep seemed to be doing no better. How about now? This little sliver of Matthew sings to me in the way it latches what Jesus said in the Beatitudes to what he did as he traveled through cities towns and villages – and to his expectations of us, the church, people claiming to be his, here and now. His explanation to his example to his expectations. A clarity to our mission and our task that informs as to the nature of our business here. We preach; we teach; we heal – according to our gifts, interests, resources, and the needs of the sheep in our midst.

Now, Jesus mixes his metaphors more than any preaching student would ever get away with. In his mind's eye they are sheep, but in his spoken lesson they are a field crop in need of harvesting – and by farm hands, not shepherds. *Pray that more will come*, Jesus tells his disciples. *There's so much to be done, so few here to help*. I have turned this verse over in my mind at least a hundred times, looking for a door or window into it.

Why does Jesus tell us to pray for more workers? It was [George Buttrick](#) who helped me get the tiger by the tail. He was a Presbyterian preacher and teacher. He pastored some churches and then taught at Andy D's school – Harvard – for decades; then at mine – Southern Baptist Theological Seminary – until his death in 1980. About this passage he wrote (I'm paraphrasing): *In calling us to his field, Jesus calls us away from the field of ambition, where the workers are many and the harvest not worth carrying away.*

Of all the reasons Jesus tells us to pray for more workers, maybe the most obvious is also the truest. It's hard and we would rather not do it. We'd rather serve our own wants, while avoiding the suffering of others. Jesus knows this about us. Knows that over the long haul of church, it will take lots of us to do this work, since *harassed and helpless* appears to be a permanent state of affairs. Other people's suffering hurts us. We are human beings. We don't like hurting, and we aren't yet enough dependent on Jesus for the grace necessary to bear such hurt. But like our religious ancestors, in the first testament and the second, we have found a way to reconcile our compassion and our self-defense and call it faith.

Just as Jesus spoke to Jewish disciples neglecting the call of their prophets, Matthew speaks to a church neglecting the call of the Christian gospel. The split we see in the crowds listening to him that day we now carry inside ourselves, inside our life together. One part of us – a big part – is, like the crowd, amazed at grace, grace freely bestowed upon all people for no other reason than that God wants it so. Another part of us, like the religious representatives of the time, persists in wanting to keep the security we already have regardless of the suffering around us.

Carl and I have a friend named Sarah. Sarah has two little girls, ages 4 and 6. Recently before school, she and the 6-year-old had this conversation: "*Eleanor, go make your breakfast.*" To which Eleanor replied, "*I want a bagel.*" Sarah said, "*Ok. You know how to make a bagel, yes?*" And Eleanor said, "*Well, I don't want to waste my time.*" These two parts of us, compassion and selfishness, vie for our energy and time. The text calls us back to honesty, reminding us that the absence of grace in all its forms – health, knowledge, justice, decency – is hurtful to God. And so God deems that it shall not be. Death is to be defeated in all its shapes and venues: sickness, poverty, and injustice; mistreatment and abuse.

We cannot help Jesus defeat death upon a cross. Neither do we need to. That business is done! But we can love people here and now. Kindness, justice, and humility are well within our reach, should those be the tools we choose to work with. I totally get Eleanor. How easily do I reconcile the importance of some work with the surety that it's someone else's job? Jesus barely tells his friends to pray for help, then he gives the job to them in the next chapter.

I'll end with this, a story from this past week. If you don't think people in our society are *harassed and helpless*, then you clearly have not met anyone trying to get enrolled in Medicaid. Medicaid is a program designed by wolves, to care for sheep. You can see the conflict of interest. As best I can tell, the mission of the program is *Do a little as possible with as much paperwork as possible*; the strategy is *stall them until they die*. And yet, inside that den of wolves, and throughout the systems connected to it, there are shepherds who are outsmarting those wolves right and left. Joan is a caseworker for the Social Security Administration and she is a wily one, let me tell ya. She coached me on how not to coach a client on his paperwork in such a way that I knew exactly how to coach him. I felt like a secret agent!

There was also a doctor, a nurse, two pharmacists and another random citizen and a banker, none of whom scored any personal or financial gain from their shepherding ways, all of whom could have spent way less time and energy and still have done their jobs. I have no idea if they call themselves Christian. I'd call them Christ-like. In the struggle between compassion and self-protection, they have chosen compassion as the driver of their lives. They have discovered compassion to be the better life. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes compassion turns our stomach.

But, friends, the pain of love is what makes us human. To the degree that others' suffering doesn't bother us, we are also becoming less human. *Humans forfeiting their humanity* eventually turns into genocide. But well before that, what we have is a world of folks who are forever helpless and harassed. Like sheep without a shepherd. Like food crops withering in a field. And that, friends, is a stupid, evil, violent waste of something as beautiful as a human being. A waste that hurts the heart of God – or gives her diarrhea, depending on one's literary era. And will hurt our own hearts too, the more obedient we become, the more like Christ we pray to be.

Would you pray with me?