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Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Ascension Lutheran Church
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Reflection: Compassion Like Jesus

I don't know if you've ever experienced the panic of being lost, but I can tell you that it's a terrifying feeling I wouldn't wish upon anyone. But even if you've never had this feeling, I think it's safe to assume that most people have had the experience of waking up in the middle of the night, confused by a bad dream or uncertain of their surroundings, and experienced a moment of fear and uncertainty. Regardless of the details, one thing is for certain – the feeling of relief from being found is enormous.

In today's Gospel text we're presented with Jesus looking over the crowds and feeling deeply for them because they were distressed and scattered like sheep, lost and wandering without a shepherd. It's here that we're brought face to face with Jesus' compassion. He saw them and had compassion for them – and this is no ordinary compassion, rather, it's a feeling from the deepest part of his being. The word translated into "compassion" is a deep, almost gut-wrenching, expression of emotion. And as Jesus looked at the crowds, his heart was moved within him.

But Jesus' compassion isn't just in response to sickness or the lack of food, but also to the situation of vulnerability. He's moved by those who apparently live on the margins of society because of illness, disability, exclusion, and not meeting the established social standards – those judged as unworthy or less than, and according to today's Scripture they are described as, "harassed and helpless."

In the Gospel of Matthew, the original word for "compassion" occurs only five times, and each time the language of compassion appears it's Jesus who is the one feeling it, after he's observed the state of those around him. Jesus feels compassion for the people afflicted both physically and socially – and each time he does, he's described as taking tangible steps toward relieving their suffering.

Compassion in the Gospel of Matthew isn't simply feeling sympathy and empathy, but Jesus himself shows that it is acting specifically on behalf of those who are suffering. And, Jesus' compassion extends beyond him to the work of those who follow him and into the life of the communities they enter.

Today's scripture is a true witness to what the season of Pentecost should be about. Pentecost isn't simply about Christians recognizing how God has empowered us through the Holy Spirit to be bold and courageous for the sake of the Gospel message. This isn't a season of empowered and inspired individualism. This is a season of recognizing that we have been empowered to see the world around us, and particularly the people in the world who are sick, injured, ignored, overlooked, and oppressed and to act alongside them and when necessary on their behalf in ways that address the circumstances that endanger their lives and communities.

Jesus' compassion for others is always sparked by an observation of those who are "harassed and helpless" and we must do something to address it – and in many instances that involves recognizing how we ourselves have perpetuated and participated in the conditions those suffering experience. What truly authenticates Christian compassion is the action that accompanies the one feeling it, not the emotion alone. Jesus' command is to love one another as I have loved you, not to simply feel bad for another.

The Bible tells us that it was after Jesus experienced life in the towns and villages, after he taught them in their own synagogues, after he touched and healed them of their illnesses. It wasn't until he saw each one of them individually, until he felt their needs, until he experienced their pain, until he was gripped with compassion. In our humanity, we aren't always quick to pay attention or listen to people or sympathize with them when they're hurting. But compassion is what motivated Jesus, and it must be that very same, overwhelming, gut-wrenching compassion that drives the Church and each of us as well.

Notice what it is that Jesus sends the twelve to do – He gives them authority to do the exact same thing that Jesus himself was doing. The ministry of the disciples grows directly out of the ministry of Jesus and so should ours. Given the difficulties of our time and the needs of so many in our society, this call to the disciples ought to mean something to us as well. The field, it seems, is ready for the harvesting. But it will take courage not outrage, compassion and love, not intolerance. Their mission and ours is an extension of Jesus' own ministry of compassion. Their message and ours is the same as his, and therefore their mission and ours are the same as his.

Everything begins because Jesus entered their world in order to see their struggles and pain and when he does, he has compassion on them. And these are the very ones that Jesus goes to – that's who Jesus sends his shepherds out to serve. Not the ones who are already righteous. Not the ones who have all their problems under control. No, Jesus goes to the marginalized – to the ones who wonder whether or not anyone cares, to the ones who are too weak to handle their problems on their own. To the ones who have made the wrong decisions in their lives. To the ones who ruined their own chances. Jesus even goes to his enemies –to the ones who insist that he must die. And Jesus dies for them all.

The harvest that Jesus has his disciples pray that laborers will be sent out into? That harvest is YOU. It doesn't matter how many laborers it takes. It doesn't matter how much Jesus has to pay. There's no price too high. What matters is bringing you and every other lost child of God home. This is the free gift of God. This is what grace is. This is why Jesus was born. Why Jesus went to the cross. Why Jesus died. And why Jesus rose from the grave and defeated death.

Because the harvest is plentiful, and YOU ARE PRICELESS TO GOD! Even with your enormous mistakes. Even with your sins. Even with your brokenness. Even when your faith is weak, and you have doubts. Even when you turn and run away. When you are lost and can't find your way back, Jesus has compassion on you. And Jesus desires to be your shepherd forever and guide you home. Thanks be to God. Amen!