

June 18, 2017 – Matthew 9:35-10:8

*“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* I don't know why, but this verse has always struck a chord with me. There's something very vivid and emotional about this image.

That Jesus, the Good Shepherd, looks at these crowds and sees sheep without a shepherd. That Jesus, who wants nothing more than to gather his flock to himself and lead them into the safety of the sheepfold, sees the people coming to him as harassed and helpless. And that, having seen that, his heart overflows with compassion.

We actually don't hear that described of Jesus all that often: compassion. You'd think we would. His whole ministry was a ministry of compassion. His whole reason for being incarnate among us was one of compassion. That he would live and suffer and die was done out of compassion. Jesus was a compassionate person. We worship a compassionate God. No doubt about it.

And yet, the Gospels are very sparing to apply that word to Jesus. Just five times in all four Gospels. And they're very pointed when they do. So we should take note of a passage like this.

*“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* Why? Why does seeing the crowds – here, now, in this particular circumstance – inspire such conspicuous compassion in Jesus that Matthew would take note of it, when he says nothing about it so many other times?

Was it the crowds? That could be part of it. Matthew does take a moment to note that it was when Jesus saw the crowds that he had compassion on them. And this is kind of a turning point in Jesus' ministry in Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus has laid a foundation of teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. He's laid a foundation of healing a leper and a centurion's daughter, a demon-possessed man and a paralytic. The combination of all these events has made Jesus very, very popular. And the crowds are starting to get really sizable. So that's maybe a factor.

Could it also be the reason that the crowds were there that strikes such a response of compassion in Jesus? That might be a factor as well. They are craving his teaching and his healing. They are sick in soul and body. They need a healing word. They need a healing touch.

I mean, who among us hasn't seen pictures in the news after a natural disaster or a terrorist attack of people with bloodied bandages and tear stained faces. And you just want to reach through the television and do something for them. Jesus can. And he does. He has compassion on them.

So these are all valid factors. But there's more to this than just the size of the crowds or the extent of their suffering. Because this is nothing new. The world is full of suffering people. And God has looked down upon this suffering since mankind first fell into sin.

In fact, this isn't even the first time that we've heard of God's people being described as sheep without a shepherd. That phrase is used in the Old Testament to describe the Israelites four different times. Moses fears the people will be like sheep without a shepherd after he's gone. And if you know anything about the time of the Judges, that's a pretty accurate description of what happens.

The prophet Micaiah foretells that the people will be like sheep without a shepherd when the king dies. The prophet Ezekiel says that the Israelites in exile – far from Jerusalem, far from the Temple – are like sheep without a shepherd. And the prophet Zechariah says that in their sinfulness and idolatry, God's people have become sheep without a shepherd.

Clearly, this is not a new scene for Jesus. Even as he stood as their Good Shepherd since the beginning of time, his people have wandered like sheep without a shepherd. We are sinful people who do what we think is right in our own eyes, not in God's eyes. We are sinful people who depend on human kings, not on our heavenly king above all kings. We are sinful people who are separated from the fullness of God's goodness like exiles because of our evil. We are sinful people who chase after false gods time and time again.

And that, I think, is what strikes Jesus most of all at this particular moment. That finally, finally, these people who have been harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, finally see the Good Shepherd that has always been in their midst. That, for the first time in their lives, they finally know that they are not sheep without a shepherd. That their Good Shepherd is standing right among them. Despite all of their sinfulness and wandering. Despite pretending like he didn't even exist. He is there. And he wants them to know that he has compassion on them.

But how exactly does he have compassion on them? Matthew doesn't just leave us with this moment of compassion by Jesus. Jesus says something after this that is really important. He says, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

We've just had a complete shift of metaphors here, which is a little jarring. From sheep and shepherds to fields and harvests. And that might be why we don't immediately connect these two sections. But they are definitely connected.

The way that Jesus has compassion on the people is by sending out his disciples. By harvesting this plentiful crop. By gathering these wandering sheep.

He sends his disciples out to do the same things he is doing. Jesus went through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and affliction. What does he tell his disciples to do? The same thing. Teach and heal.

Go to the lost sheep of Israel. Go to these people who are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. And as you go proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. Proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand. And heal every disease and affliction. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.

And do it all with compassion. You received without paying; give without pay. Do it out of love for your neighbor. Do it because I have had compassion on you. So also you should have compassion on them.

*"When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* And so, in compassion for the crowds, he called his disciples and sent them out. In compassion for the world, he called you and sent you out.

That's why Matthew highlights Jesus' compassion here. Because you are the compassion of God. You are the living, breathing, embodiment of Jesus' love for the world.

A love that lived and suffered and died to forgive your sins. But also a love that sees a whole world that is harassed by the devil and helpless against death. That are sheep without a shepherd. And so he chooses to send you into it. To be the hands and feet and voice of his compassion.

You are the laborers in the fields. And the harvest is plentiful. The crowds are desperate to hear what Jesus taught. They are begging to be healed by water and Word.

They may not know it, of course. How could they? They are sheep without a shepherd. They have no one to lead them to springs of living water. They have no one to walk through the valley of the shadow of death by their side. They will have no one unless you go to them.

You know, I mentioned earlier about when you're watching the news and you see the victims of a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. And you just want to reach through the screen to help them. To have compassion on them.

Well, you and I may not be able to go to every natural disaster or every terrorist attack. But we don't have to. Look around you. Look at this community through the eyes of Jesus. Look at them as sheep without a shepherd. Harassed and helpless by death and the devil. With bloodied bandages and tear stained faces. They need you. And you have been sent to them. Amen.