

Matt 9.36
St Stephens

Nov 1, 2009
Weekend Worship

The Compassion of God

30 Days of Compassion:

Teachings on:

- Compassion itself, on Hospitality, on...
- The Second Commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself
- The Golden Rule: Do to others what you would like them to do for you.

A dozen projects. You saw the photos; **here are some of the numbers:**

We even stretched it out to 31 days. Ok, now you can go back to being your normal self. Whew! Glad that's over!!

One of the reasons why we are doing this is because we want to **reset our missions DNA**. The **old view** is that the mission field is somewhere out there, way out there. But increasingly we have come to realize that **missions always starts right here**, on the streets where we live and in the boroughs and cities where we work. The mission field is right next door.

A **second part** of our missions DNA that we want to reset is the idea that **missions is only about sharing the gospel**. Well, that is not true. Don't get me wrong here. We love the gospel, and missions is always about the good news of Jesus, sooner or later. But what we want to say this month is that **missions starts not with words, but with deeds**. The mission of Jesus always started with his compassion, and then went on to his teaching. People have to know that you care before they care what you know.

And there is **a third thing** we want to get right also. The old view of

missions is that **missions is for the missionaries.** But it is not. It's for every follower of Jesus.

So here is the shift we are asking you to make: **The mission of Jesus starts right here and it starts with the love of our neighbors, and you are on the team.** Say 'starts right here', 'starts with his love', 'I'm on his team'.

Our passage this morning is one of the summary passages in Matthew of the mission of Jesus. He is going from town to town in Judea. His ministry up to this point has been spectacular. In just this section of Matthew's gospel, Jesus heals a man with leprosy, he heals the son of a Roman officer, and then he heals Peter's mother-in-law and opens a healing mission to the region from her home. Again and again we hear the phrase, 'he healed all the sick'. Then He crosses the Sea of Galilee with his disciples at night and gets caught in a storm and tells it to be quiet – and suddenly it is dead calm. On the other side he delivers two demon possessed men who had terrorized the region. That is just chapter 8. Chapter 9 is just as spectacular. Here is the summary verse:

Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

Matt 9.35

Note the phrases Matthew uses: 'all' the cities & villages, 'every' disease and 'every' affliction. Nothing like this had ever happened before, and the result of this mission is that crowds flocked to Jesus. Word about what was happening spread like wildfire, and hoards of people flocked to Jesus. Then we come to the verse I want to focus on:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matt 9.36

This had been **a long stretch of ministry** for Jesus, certainly weeks

and probably months. Everywhere he went there were scores of people who met him and came to him. It was 'night and day', unceasing, overwhelming, really. There were times in this stretch when he would try and get away from the crowds, to get a break. Sometimes late at night he would go off by himself, or early in the morning, just to pray. He would try from time to time to get his disciples away to think and talk and pray. But everywhere he went, the **crowds pressed in**.

I doubt, by the way, that anyone in the crowd paused to ask Jesus how he was doing. Max Lucado says, *'No one has come to give; all have come to take.'*

How do you do when it seems like everyone has 'come to take' for day after day, week after week? Moms have stretches like that with children. You could be a teller at a bank or a nurse on a hospital floor and have days like that. You could be a care-giver in a nursing home or a youth pastor on a retreat weekend or an executive in a hard pressed business and have days like that. **Everyone wants a piece of you.** And there's not enough of you to go around.

But Matthew tells us Jesus *'had compassion on them'*. It always **seemed like there was enough of him to go around!**

I'd like to dig into this verse for a bit, because it says a lot about God's compassion. We are told that he had compassion when **he 'saw the crowds'**. I think that is important. Because **he saw things that we often miss**. One thing that he 'saw' was that they were

- **harassed** that's what happens when you are buffeted by the difficulties of life that seem beyond your control. (A relationship fails, or a child gets really sick, or you lose a job, or you keep failing in that one certain area, and you're fatigued, worn out, exhausted)
- **helpless...** that means you are "caught in things beyond your control"

It does stir your compassion for people when you see them caught in

things that are making life impossible. So he saw their brokenness and failure and frustration as they came towards him. And he was stirred with compassion.

But that is not all he saw. **He saw something else.** He saw something you and I often miss. He saw **their glory.** He saw their beauty. He saw their dignity. He saw **something of himself** in them. The theological phrase for it is the **'image of God.'** It is why I had the passage from Genesis 9 read today.

If anyone takes a human life, that person's life will also be taken by human hands. For God made human beings in his own image.

Genesis 9.6

The flood has just subsided and the Ark has found dry land and God is renewing his covenant with Noah and his family and he is taking time to get some important things straight. He is **putting a circle around each human life**, from the time of conception to the time of natural death, saying 'don't murder anymore'. Why? Because human beings are made in the image of God. That means we share his spiritual and rational nature, we share his likeness. That means our destiny stretches into eternity, for better or for worse. The universe will pass away, but people live forever. That is why he places high value on every life, no matter how broken, how harassed, how helpless.

People matter to God.

That is what Jesus sees when he looks out over the crowds. He sees...
their beauty and their brokenness
their dignity and their disgrace
their importance and their impotence

He sees them both at the same time. That is the source of his compassion.

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No one has said this better, I think, than C.S. Lewis in a famous sermon called 'The Weight of Glory'

...It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. ...

Those words changed how I looked at people forever. I began to look at people that I had nothing in common with and whisper to myself, 'made in the image of the living God'. 'Look how great the love of God is...'

Oftentimes we get stuck when we look at people. We get caught in superficial things. Surface things. How they dress. How they carry themselves. How much like us they are. **Jesus saw deeper.**

Nothing was hidden from him. There are **no secrets** before him. He looked out on that crowd and knew **where they had been**, knew

where they would go. As they flooded towards him, He knew what they deserved and what they didn't.

But he saw deeper yet. He knew **where they had come from**, how they were made, and whose they were. *'He had compassion on them.'* Some would call it **'undeserved'**. Probably. Some would call it **'wasted'**. Perhaps. **But you and I know that undeserved compassion can change your past, and change your future.**

We call it **grace**. There is not enough of it in your neighborhood. *'The harvest is ripe'*, Jesus said. *'The workers are few'*, Jesus said. He's looking to build his mission.

So here is what God wants us to be clear about: **The mission of Jesus starts right here and it starts with his love for our neighbors, and we are on the team.**

Say 'starts right here', 'starts with his love', 'I'm on his team'.