

Rev. Robert W. Brown

What can you do?

Matthew 9:35-10:8

INTRODUCTION:

Today's scripture text is from the Gospel of Matthew. At this point in the story Jesus has decidedly entered into his ministry. He has already chosen his 12 disciples, discovered his "preaching voice" while delivering the exquisite *Sermon on the Mount* and begun the work of ministering to the desperate and needy outcasts. He heals scores of people - relieves tormented souls of their demons, and demonstrates his divinity by calming a huge storm with only a word. He even brings a young girl back from the dead. All these things Matthew writes about indicate to us that Jesus is no ordinary man but is clearly God's number one agent. The one who gives us unprecedented insight into the nature and intention of God's involvement in the world.

We pick up today with Chapter 9, verse 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. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

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. 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.



What a rough week it has been around the world; hourly news feeds, pushed to our devices show the steady violence raging in our parks and public spaces - both here and abroad. We watch live news feeds as tragedies unfold on our multiple screens. Our hearts break. It makes me want to avoid the daily news and cancel all my push notifications. What can you do?

As people of faith and followers of Jesus, there is more than you might think. Brian McLaren, the public theologian, author, and social activist asks the question,

“What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a **problematic system of beliefs** but as a **just and generous way of life**, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion?”<sup>1</sup>

“A just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion.” Maybe that’s a start. But first, let us pray.

*Generous and compassionate God, God of all justice and mercy, we come before you with open hearts, yearning for understanding. Help us this morning to gain insight into your ways. And, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN*

Jesus had been busy doing a lot of good things – teaching, preaching, curing every disease – casting out demons – changing water into wine! He was quite busy addressing the people’s needs, and proclaiming the liberating Good News. The crowds were growing daily. Matthew writes that when Jesus saw these crowds, “*he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*”

Jesus had no “push notifications” feeding his device. He just looks around what is in front of him and sees a sea of hurt. I imagine that is also true for him today because *harassed and helpless* kind of defines our cultural ethos today. Synonyms for harassed include, stressed, distraught, beleaguered, worried, strained, harried, agitated, and pressured. Sound familiar? I felt every single one of those feelings this past week, and certainly feelings of helplessness every time I read the news. What can you do?

I know that God’s heart breaks too and that Jesus connects deeply with our grief and pain. I wonder if when he saw the crowds, if he felt overwhelmed, tired, and wondered what more he could do? We do read that his reaction was compassion.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/what-religion-would-jesus-belong-to.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/what-religion-would-jesus-belong-to.html?_r=1)

Compassion, I think, always begins with discomfort. Deep compassion starts as a sickening feeling really. The original Greek word that Matthew uses here, translated as compassion, didn't mean heartbreak as much as it was associated with a visceral feeling; an instinctive almost primal connection to another's pain. It's a deep compassion felt in the pit of your stomach. It was more gut wrenching. It's the discomfort that comes with seeing and identifying with another's struggle, pain, grief or loss. We've all felt it to some degree.

I remember back in 2012 our youth group mission trip that year went to Los Angeles. We went to expose ourselves to the urban poor. We didn't build anything. Instead, each day we worked in various places that served a variety of poor people in the city. One day we went to what is know as Skid Row. You've probably heard of it before. This is a very small area of the city where thousands of people with no money and nothing to do are herded by police, hospitals and emergency workers. The population density in a 2000 census was 4,111 people per square mile! Most of them living on the street. To walk among these poor people was difficult to say the least. Noticing the crowds, we had 'compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.' Our compassion began in the pit of our stomach.

Often we don't know what to do or say when the uncomfortable feeling of compassion comes upon us. We have to wrestle with the dissonance and contradiction within ourselves that knows, deep down in our gut, that even though this is not *our* state of reality, it is also not how *anyone's* life is suppose to be. This discomfort with another persons suffering or injustice is only the beginning of compassion. What happens next is that true compassion will evoke some kind of action. We are compelled to do something that will alleviate another's pain. Every father and mother knows that compulsion. In fact, compassion is imbedded in every human being.

A recent study found that this ability to be compassionate is deep within our human nature. They actually found that toddlers under two years old were decidedly happier when they helped another in need.<sup>2</sup> I know that when I sit with my 17-month-old grandson and he is eating a cup of Cheerios he will only eat one if I also am happy eating one. He feeds me a Cheerio. The study concluded that the toddlers were measurably happier when they gave away a treat than when they received a treat.

Still, what can you do when you see suffering all around you? This is what Jesus did. He gathered his disciples and sent them out to accompany the lost sheep. Essentially he said, "Go and do as I have shown you." Simply be with the suffering and offer

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797612440571>

them what you can. Our faith in God, our belief in the way of Jesus is more about doing, more about giving. Is it possible to think of faith not so much as an intellectual agreement to an abstract theology, but more as a way of behaving out of compassion? What if you approached each day remembering the idea that everyone you meet today is fighting some great battle and all you need do is not add to their war? What if our faith became real through habitual kindness as an instinctual response? Jesus first demonstrated this to his disciples then tells them to go and do the same.

There was not much we could do to alleviate the suffering we saw in Los Angeles, but our compassion led us to places where we could simply be present with the other's hurt. We got to serve people lunch at the soup kitchen. We sat across from them and listened to their stories. We acknowledged them as individual human beings worthy of being heard and seen. Henri Nouwen wrote,

"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless."

To follow Jesus is to find your compassion and stay with the discomfort so you can do only what is in you to do. You won't end the problem, but you will make a difference. Skid row is still thriving, but I know I'm different. I no longer see the homeless as a nameless group but as individuals worthy of dignity. My compassion for the needy feels the discomfort but quickly leads me into simply being present, listening deeply and then taking whatever action I am able to help. Everyone can do that.

What can you do? We can think of our faith as a "just and generous way of life." We can seek to understand the nature of suffering in the others we meet and enter into the places of pain and brokenness. This is how we act our way into a real and tangible faith that becomes the center point of a meaningful life, a life "rooted in contemplation and expressed in action."

So let us go as disciples of Jesus, in the Way of Jesus to proclaim the good news by acting out our faith because the kingdom of heaven has come near. Amen.