

**First Things First**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
November 21, 2021 – PM Service  
Chad Boorsma  
Matthew 9:35-38

Imagine a story of two friends playing in a backyard sandbox. They are going at it with their trucks, their shovels, and their pails. Sand is flying as they build hills, dig tunnels, and shape roads for their toy cars to travel. One of them notices, though, through the open garage door, that a pizza delivery vehicle has pulled into the driveway. Shortly thereafter, the mom of one of the boys calls out, “time for lunch!” The two race into the house, kick off their shoes, and see the steaming pizza on the dining room table. Famished from their serious efforts in the sandbox, they are ready to dig in. “Hold it,” the mom says, “not so fast. You first need to wash your hands.” First things first.

Our story that we read tonight is followed by a lengthy series of instructions in chapter 10 that Jesus gives to his disciples. Some call those instructions Jesus’ second discourse or his sermon on mission. “Go to the lost sheep of Israel. Proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Take no bag for the journey. As you enter a home, give it your greeting.” There are a lot of things that the disciples need to do and not do. But before Jesus gives instructions to the disciples on how they are to go, we find Jesus surveying the situation before him, and he tells his disciples, in a matter of speaking, that they, too, need to put first things first.

Our passage tonight begins with Jesus on the move. He is a traveling preacher, an itinerant evangelist walking and moving about the province of Galilee, teaching and preaching the good news of the kingdom. Jesus goes *everywhere*, not just to cities to see the masses, but also to the smaller villages to see the crowds there as well. And as he goes everywhere, he heals *every* disease and *every* sickness as he seeks to relieve the human misery he encounters.

What Jesus sees, though, in addition to human sickness, are crowds in need of a different kind of help. The two words that Matthew uses to describe this condition are often translated *harassed* and *helpless*. The words imply that the people are walking with difficulty because they are bewildered, mangled, and cast down. Jesus sees them as “sheep without a shepherd.”

Philip Keller, in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, describes how sheep can get turned over on their backs and not be able to get themselves up again. Such sheep are called “cast” or “cast down” sheep. These sheep flail with their legs in the air, but they can’t get back on their feet without the aid of the shepherd. Left in this condition, helpless and vulnerable to their enemies, they will die after a few hours or perhaps a few days. This is a picture of people without Jesus, without the Good Shepherd. Outwardly, they may look calm and comfortable, but Jesus sees their heart. They are unable to extricate themselves from their sin, causing them to be downcast and dispirited.

This is also a picture of those without good spiritual leadership. The Jewish religious leaders of the day, the Scribes and the Pharisees, should have been shepherding these people and pointing them to God. But instead they were self-righteous and self-seeking, asking more of the people than they were willing to give them. An example of this were the strict laws they created for the people to follow, especially when it came to the observation of the Sabbath. This type of leadership left the people weary and worn. Jesus looks at the entire situation and gazes upon the crowd with his eyes. If we were to use a modern paraphrase, he would say, “These people are barely making it.”

I don’t think I need to tell anyone here tonight that there are many people in our world today who are “barely making it.” Some deal with health issues like cancer or dementia. Some wrestle with emotional conditions like depression or bipolar disorder. Still others struggle with social and relational conflicts, especially since the onset of Covid. For example, I have been a teacher in for 26 years, and some families that I have worked with previously have suddenly taken on very different attitudes since the pandemic began. Many people appear to be angry about many things. There are also the concerns here in LaGrave’s neighborhood, such as homelessness and food insecurity – one issue that we are assisting with tonight as we look into the narthex to see food and monetary donations for the downtown food pantry. The needs are everywhere, and so are the need for more workers. Sometimes, though, even when we have workers, we don’t have eyes to see the needs as Jesus sees them.

A number of years ago, researchers decided to find out if seminary students would be Good Samaritans. They met individually with 40 ministerial students and told them they would be doing a study of careers in the church. Each student was instructed to walk to a nearby building to record an impromptu talk. Some were told to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan, while others were instructed to talk about their career concerns. Meanwhile, the researchers planted an actor along the path who, as a seminarian approached, groaned and slumped to the ground. They found that more than half of the students simply walked right on by. The researchers noted, "Some, who were planning their dissertation on the Good Samaritan, literally stepped over the slumped body as they hurried along." (cited by William McRae, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Gifts*)

Probably your first reaction to that story is to think, "How could these students be so hard-hearted as to ignore this hurting man?" In this situation, they were so preoccupied with themselves and the immediate pressure they faced (to deliver the talk) that they did not see the obvious need in their own path. They did not see the slumped-over man as Jesus would have seen him. But my hunch is that those students represent many of us, if we're honest. Often we don't see as Jesus sees either. When we're out in public, do we look carefully into people's faces? If we do, we can see many distressed, troubled people – some who are cast down by the circumstances of life, some by the entanglement of their own sins, some even by the church who fails to show them the path of Jesus, along with his mercy and grace that they so desperately need.

Jesus, in our text tonight, does not bypass or ignore the people who are in desperate need. Instead, he looks upon them, sees their helplessness, and he has compassion on them – not a feeling that comes from the mind, or even just from the heart, but a feeling that goes down deep, down to the gut, down to the bowels. That's the meaning of the Greek word used in the text -- *splagchnizomai*. Jesus feels for these people, and their needs grab him down deeply.

Then, as he stands there gazing upon the crowd, he turns and faces his disciples, and says, "The harvest is plentiful. So many people are in need, and the workers, the laborers who can show them this love, this compassion, they are so few in number." The task at hand looks hopeless, as Jesus seems to admit, but statistics are not what really matters. What really matters is the living God, and Jesus refers the disciples – and us – to come to God in prayer. "Ask," he says, "beg, plead to the Father, to the Lord of the harvest, to send workers out into the harvest field." In the depressing face of immense need and tiny resources, the disciples are referred to the Lord in prayer and to *his* recruiting work, not to theirs. Little did they know, the recruitment efforts would involve recruiting them for the work that was at hand.

Dale Bruner, in his commentary on Matthew, notes that the source of the church's missionary power from the human side is prayer, while from the divine side is the heart of Christ. We see that often in the book of Acts as well – mission, humanly speaking, was born in prayer meetings (Acts 1:14, 2:42, 4:24-31, 13:1-3). Christian mission in Matthew, too, is now launched for the first time formally, and this launching takes place by first praying to the Father. What a wonderful combination – the compassion of Christ and the power of prayer.

The deep compassion in tonight's text, as well as in Psalm 103 that we read earlier, almost appears to be something limited to God. But that Greek word, *splagchnizomai*, is used in other places in scripture as well, some of which also involve Jesus, but there are also places where God uses everyday people to show compassion to others: the master who forgave the servant's debt (Matthew 18:27), the good Samaritan (Luke 10:33), and the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). All of these stories use that same word, and they give us a glimpse of what it looks like to demonstrate such compassion.

So does a story that Howard Vanderwell tells in his book, *Living and Loving Life*, about a group of children. They were standing in a huddle on the playground, and most of them were crying. In the center was a young boy doubled over in pain. The teacher approached the group and asked, "What's the matter? What is the problem?" One little girl answered, "We've all got the pain in Jimmy's stomach." What a wonderful explanation of compassion -- the ability to feel someone else's pain in your stomach. Those who have been loved by Christ ought to have sensitive stomachs, just as Jesus did, and that heart of Christ should lead the church to the heart of prayer.

Bruner notes in his commentary that praying to God needs to be first if we are to expand our mission and connect others to Christ. Attempts to enlarge our missions that largely bypass prayer and depend on other things are often doomed to fail. This has been true in many "mainline" churches where prayer meetings have ceased, and congregations instead rely heavily on things such as reorganization, stewardship drives, and committee work – thinking they alone will be sufficient. Now, don't misunderstand me, I know that much

effective kingdom work happens here at LaGrave by committee, but even so, as Jesus teaches in the passage tonight, prayer should come first. We need God to guide us by his Spirit. We need God to lead us as we make decisions. We need God to supply all we need. We need God to give us eyes so we can see as Jesus sees.

I have to confess that I am a list-maker and find it an effective way to get things done. Perhaps some of you can relate. During my years of teaching, I have always had a white legal pad with “Things to do...” written across the top. From my desk at home, to my bag, to my desk at school, and back again, it travels with me. I often have lists for church, too: people to visit, calls to make, e-mails to send. As I get older, these lists have become even more important, because if I don’t write things down, I usually forget to do them. Perhaps some of you can relate to that as well. But sometimes we fall into the trap thinking that hard work, list-making, agendas, meetings -- as effective as they may be -- will be sufficient. Sometimes we forget that God is the one who supplies all we need, and that prayer needs to be the first focus.

David Platt, author of the book *Radical*, tells the story of a friend who spent a couple weeks in South Korea, a country that God has blessed with explosive growth in the Christian church. His friend was staying in a hotel, and one morning, around four o’clock, he was awakened by a loud noise outside. He staggered over the window, pulled back the curtains, and saw a stadium filled with people. He wondered, “What kind of sport do Koreans play at four in the morning?” Frustrated, he crawled back into bed and tried to sleep through the noise coming from across the street.

Later that morning, he went down to the hotel lobby and asked the manager what kind of sporting event had been going on in the stadium. The hotel manager responded, “Sir, that was no sporting event. That was the church gathered for prayer.”

May God empower that same spirit of prayer to be evident in our country, in our community, and in our church. People of God, let us put first things first and spend time as the church gathered for prayer.

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