

Reconnecting with Compassion¹
Matthew 9:35-10:8
June 18, 2017
Pentecost +2A
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Before we get to verse 35 of Matthew 9, I think we need to hear the action of the preceding chapters in rapid succession. Jesus is born, named, blessed, protected. Then he is baptized, blessed, tested, and returns home. There he immediately begins teaching, gathering disciples, healing people, blessing them, and teaching some more. Matthew says he goes up a hillside and teaches huge crowds—turning everything they’ve ever been taught on its head and then pushing it farther. The crowds go wild at this remarkable way of getting a faith like nothing they’d ever heard before.

Eugene Peterson writes, “Jesus came down the mountain with the cheers of the crowd still ringing in his ears. Then a leper appeared.” He healed the leper and blessed him. Then a Roman captain came in a panic asking healing for his servant. Jesus heals him. He then walks into Peter’s house, and Peter’s mother-in-law is sick in bed. Jesus heals her. “That evening a lot of demon-afflicted people were brought to him. He relieved the inwardly tormented. He cured the bodily ill,” reads verse 16.² After this flurry of healing and blessing work, he knows he needs to get away and be quiet because the crowds are gathering as the word of his healing spreads. He invites his disciples to follow, they get in a boat and leave for quiet rest. Immediately, a storm surrounds them. The disciples panic, Jesus stands and silences the wind, quiets the sea, and the disciples are shocked.

Rest doesn’t happen in Matthew’s telling of the story. Jesus is after quiet, but when they land on the other side of the lake they are immediately met by two men possessed by demons. Jesus heals them. They get back in the boat and go back home. On the other side, men are waiting for them with a paraplegic friend on a stretcher. Jesus heals him. He takes a break to eat with a tax collector and disreputable characters. The same religious leaders who criticized him for the way he healed people then criticized him for spending his time with crooks and riffraff. Jesus looks at them and replies, “I’m after mercy, not religion. I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.”

¹ John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity’s Struggle for New Beginnings*

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message* paraphrase of Matthew’s gospel

He manages one more teaching lesson before a local official appears and asks Jesus to resuscitate his daughter who just died. On the way, a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years reaches out to touch Jesus' robe, and she's healed just because she believes she can be and tries. Jesus arrives at the house, revives the girl, and news spreads. Jesus leaves the house, two blind men follow him, and he touches their eyes to give them sight. Right after that a man arrives who had been made speechless by an evil spirit. Jesus heals him. People know what Jesus is doing, and the outsiders he's inviting in are applauding him while the insiders he isn't coddling are calling it hocus-pocus and the devil's work.

THEN Jesus made a circuit of the towns and villages. Where he taught and met and healed. He "healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke."³ And this is when he prayed for the 12 and invited them to pray, too. He knew he couldn't do all of the work by himself, so he sent them out in his way and in his name. He commissioned these 12 friends by name and sent them out with instructions to start right where they already lived—healing the sick, raising the dead, touching the untouchables, kicking out demons, sharing from their well of love and generosity. He invites them, blesses them, and sends them to live into the Jesus Way with more love than money, and more intuition than a plan. He trusts them to get it right.

Holding that action-packed Jesus work in one hand, let's turn with the other to John Philip Newell's book *The Rebirthing of God*. In our first week, we heard Newell's jarring statement that we are witnessing the collapse of the Western church, but also witnessing something new rising. Newell says the job of the church in the West at this time "is to ask what is trying to be born that requires a radical reorientation of our vision. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?"⁴

Week 2—Reconnecting with the Beginning, Newell invited us to listen to the prophets of the early church and into the 21st century as we remember the blessing of creation. "As Julian of Norwich puts it, we are made 'of God.' We are made of the Light that was in the beginning. We are made of the Wisdom that fashioned the universe in its glory of interrelatedness. We are made of the Love that longs for oneness. This is not to

³ Matthew 9.37 *The Message*

⁴ Newell, p. xi

deny our capacity for falseness and for the ugly betrayals that tear us apart. It is simply to say that deeper still is our of-Godness.”⁵

If we have fallen away from our of-God-ness, then we must reconnect with that first image and likeness, that first light and wisdom. Newell describes this first step of reconnection and rebirthing as “the desire to move back into relationship with everything that is of God.”

And the desire to move back into relationship with everything that is of God is an active process of cultivating and practicing compassion. Newell is writing from the Iona Community in Scotland and describes a prayer walk stop at the only place on the island where the roads meet, aptly called the Crossroads. At that physical point in the prayer walk, where east-west and north-south touch, participants “pause at this intersection to ask what are the crossroads of our lives and our world today. In our individual lives, or as families and nations, as religious traditions as a species, what are the critical junctures at which we stand? How do we know where to turn?” He then points to the Wisdom traditions of scripture and the prophets of compassion guiding us today.

One of those modern prophets is Suu Kyi of Burma who “has spent most of the last twenty-five years under house arrest” because of her political activism and peace efforts “for democracy in Burma.”⁶ Suu Kyi says the thing that drives her work is the way of compassion—being with suffering. Newell writes, “She has compassion for her people in their suffering, but her commitment to compassion also extends to the leaders of Burma’s military dictatorship—to those who have wronged her, her family, and her nation. ‘If I had really started hating my captors,’ she says, ‘I would have defeated myself.’ Hatred blinds us to the wisdom in our soul.” The compassion she describes is more than a warm feeling and wishing strangers well. This is a life’s work of resisting our own darkness and chasing after the light of God in the world, in ourselves, and within all those whom we meet. Compassion is active. Compassion is persistent.

Newell then draws us into this imagery of road and path and way we are traveling together as he tells of a harrowing hike with his wife when dense fog rapidly surrounded the mountain. The only way down was to move slowly and deliberately with a map and a compass. They could not see the path and could not tell when a turn might be off a cliff instead of toward safety. It was the compass that rooted them to their place and then guided them forward, step by step. There’s an etymological connection between compass and compassion—they share a root word. “A compass...

⁵ Newell, p. 1

⁶ Newell, p. 16

is used to determine the relationship between two points. The related word *compassion* is about honoring the relationship between two people who suffer. It is about making the connection between the heart of my being and the heart of yours, and following that connection—just as [they] followed the compass in descending the mist-covered mountain—even when we are filled with doubts as to whether we are moving in the right direction.”⁷ Compassion is active. Compassion is persistent. Compassion is a guide.

I am convinced part of the new thing emerging will require a shift in the language we are using because we need to hear the language of faith as though for the first time. I am personally shifting to the language of the early church—followers of the Way. The churches of guilt, fear, and manipulation will be no more. The churches of entertainment and passive participation will be no more. We are moving forward and far backward at once—retuning to the Jesus story as voluntary and active participants who are named, blessed, and sent out to live this thing out in real time together. This Way brings to mind the words of 19th century Spanish Poet Antonio Machado, “wanderer, we have no road/we make the road by walking.” This is an emerging path that we are trodding together.

Suu Kyi describes another path; “a threefold path of compassion that is directly related to her Buddhist inheritance and practice. She describes this compassionate way as ‘The courage to see. The courage to feel. And the courage to act.’ To live compassionately, she says, is to courageously see the connection between ourselves and those who suffer. Not only do we see the connection and become aware of it, but we allow ourselves to feel it. Finally, it is not just to see and feel the connection but to act on it, to courageously take responsibility for those who suffer.”

This is what Matthew is describing in the gospel lesson before us today. “When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus then sends his students out in search of lost sheep and instructs them, “As you go, proclaim the good news: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.” We get jittery when we hear the instruction to proclaim the good news because we’ve witnessed or horribly wrong that can go—knocking on doors, interrupting strangers to inquire about their eternal salvation. What is good news according to Jesus? The good news is healing. The good news is restoring health and wholeness and community. The good news is

⁷ Newell, p. 17

enabling someone to thrive physically and spiritually and even financially—not burdening them unnecessarily with payments for the life-giving care they've received.

Newell observes of Jesus in these gospel stories, "He notices. He allows himself to be conscious of the needs of others—their health, happiness, hunger." It is also in Matthew's gospel that thousands have gathered "around Jesus in the countryside, to be in his presence, to be taught by him. And who notices that the crowd is hungry? Jesus himself. He makes the connection between his own needs and their needs. He says, 'I have compassion for the crowd,'" and he feeds them.

What must we notice in a radical, path-trodding way together? We have already begun this work here. We are already on this path, and it's not an easy one. Today's sermon is not a push to drive you toward something foreign to you. Instead, may these words be a balm and encouragement to you as they have been in writing for me. We are on a path that is ancient and new, well worn yet somehow freshly emerging. We sense sometimes the unity and passion of this calling and then we hesitate because the new does not have all of the comfort and markings of the old. There are moments of grief swirling with moments of great joy as some have already said they can't continue walking this road with us. Yet others are showing up and asking to join us in the seeing and feeling and acting required in this way of living compassionately—the way modeled by Christ Jesus.

What must we notice? We must notice the same suffering and injustice and basic life needs that Jesus noticed. In our modern context, that means realities and root causes of poverty. It means advocating for prison reform and robust health care and mental health care. It means speaking to our nation's gluttonous military spending. It means expanding our knowledge of and attention to refugees, immigration reform, and the Sanctuary movement. It means working with civic leaders, attorneys, judges, faith leaders, and neighbors to abolish the death penalty. It means responding to another headline of a mass shooting by giving flesh to our prayers as we work for comprehensive gun reform even though it seems impossible. It means listening with open-hearts to the voices of Black Lives Matter, joining as allies, and seeing the great injustice and reality that black and brown bodies are not treated the same as white bodies in this country, particularly by the police and the criminal justice system. It means we must resist in formal, organized, deliberate ways when our government pushes policy and law and executive orders to formalize and increase the suffering of our brothers and sisters who are LGBTQ, people of color, undocumented workers, stuck in the system of incarceration, and generally underrepresented by those in power.

And for those who think I'm practicing my stump speech and making a political party out of the church, just know I'm just stepping with both feet into the call of Jesus in Matthew 10 to proclaim the good news as you go. Let me share with you the words of one of our modern-day prophets whose work will absolutely be noted by history. In *The New York Times* last week, the Rev. Dr. William Barber said, "If you think this is just a left-versus-right movement, you're missing the point...This is about the moral center. This is about our humanity."⁸

The moral center. Our humanity. This is not my choosing to be a politician rather than a preacher. This is my claiming the words of Jesus to take the good news of transformational healing to the people who need it most. This is giving ourselves to the Jesus Way that compels us notice and see, to be moved with compassion, and to DO SOMETHING about what we see. As Dr. William Barber says, "We can't choose the moment that the flame bursts out, but we can be the kindling."⁹ And I believe with every fiber of my being that any church that will survive the next 25 years and burn once again with the flames of Pentecost's spirit fire will be the ones who are seeing and feeling and acting together in the way and name of Jesus. Compassion is active. Compassion is persistent. Compassion is a guide. Compassion is the fire in the belly of the Holy Spirit guiding us forward on the path we cannot see.

May you, my brothers and sisters, be filled with the compassion of Jesus Christ today. Amen.

⁸ Laurie Goodstein, "Religious Liberals Sat Out of Politics for 40 Years. Now They Want in the Game." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2017.

⁹ as quoted by Laurie Goodstein, <https://nyti.ms/2s7tUrT>