

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *The Holy Ministry*
Service Theme: *The Holy Ministry Demonstrates God's Compassion for People*

Sermon Theme: *The Compassion of the Christ(ian)*
July 2, 2023 Matthew 9:35-10:8

Marketing people know what they're doing. Have you ever seen those advertisements for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, where they loop pictures and videos of filthy, mangy, malnourished dogs and cats, and then slowly zoom in on a puppy literally giving you sad, puppy dog eyes? Or how the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital draws your attention to pictures and videos of bald children, weak from battling cancer, but still smiling and playing like children do? Or the Christian organization, Compassion International, which encourages people to sponsor impoverished children in foreign countries while displaying images of skinny, crying children of all different races and ethnicities living in slums, or digging through garbage?

I'm not saying that's a bad thing. Such advertising highlights real, heartbreaking tragedies that affect real people in an effort to get them help. But there's a reason such marketing is successful at getting into people's wallets-- they've first gotten into people's hearts. When we see people or animals who are hopeless and helpless, it awakens a spirit of compassion in us, and a desire to help.

That shouldn't surprise us, because God has wired compassion for others into our hearts. It shouldn't surprise us, because that's exactly what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel! So today, we want to focus on The Compassion of Christ, how Jesus' compassion motivates us to show compassion as Christians, and how the Holy Ministry demonstrates God's compassion for people.

In today's text, Jesus was about two years into his earthly ministry, going *"through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness."* He'd preached his famous Sermon on the Mount. He'd cleansed lepers, made paralytics walk, given sight to the blind, a voice to the mute, and hearing to the deaf. He'd displayed his power over Satan by driving out demons, and his power over death by bringing a little girl back to life.

But instead of focusing on his fame, or his feats, Jesus focused outwardly. Matthew tells us, *"When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* Seeing the spiritually filthy, spiritually malnourished crowds before him, Jesus was filled with compassion for them.

The Greek in which Matthew's Gospel was originally written says, Jesus *"σπλαγχνίζομαι,"* which literally means Jesus "felt pain in his guts" for them. Jesus compassion for the crowds went to his very core! We usually talk about the heart being the seat of our emotions, like saying we're "heartbroken" by sad news. But in Jesus' day, they viewed your guts as the seat of your emotions. So, next year, put a large intestine on your Valentine's Day card. Same idea!

However, this Greek word for "compassion" is used 12 times in the New Testament, but only in reference to God or Jesus mercifully intervening for someone. Which means, the kind of compassion Jesus displays here is different than the kind of compassion people generally feel for a forlorn puppy or a child with cancer. That compassion is usually produced by sad physical circumstances. While Jesus showed compassion for people's physical needs through his miraculous healings, he still had a spiritual purpose for them—to verify and communicate the good news that Jesus, the Son of God came to proclaim and accomplish salvation for all people. So Jesus' compassion was produced by the sad spiritual state of the crowds!

Throughout those 2 years of ministry, Jesus had seen people's spiritual struggles firsthand. Like sheep surrounded by wolves, Satan and his

evil forces had constantly been attacking. But the crowds were receiving no protection from their spiritual leaders. Instead, they were being led astray; beaten, bloodied, and exhausted by the teaching that they needed to earn God's love by following man-made laws far too heavy for them to uphold. So Jesus' guts ached with compassion for these poor, spiritually lost sheep without a shepherd.

Which necessitates a personal compassion comparison for us. How does the compassion we feel and show to others compare to Jesus' compassion? Our hearts break and the tears flow when we see a little girl with cancer, or an elderly parent wasting away from dementia, or a family who lost everything in a housefire. We might even willingly give our time or money to show compassion to someone physically or emotionally burdened. But do we feel the same kind of compassion for those who are sick and dying...from the disease of sin?

Pride Month just ended. Do you look at those in the LGBTQ community as enemies who need to be defeated? Or do you see them as lost sheep--led astray by false teachers, destructive ideologies, and Satan's best efforts—who need to be compassionately shepherded to the truth of God's Word? Are there people in your life shackled in the slavery of addictions? Do you hate them and push them away for their weakness and the ways they've harmed themselves and you? Or do you see them as helpless sinners trapped under the demonic power of addictive substances, and likely mental health problems? Don't get me wrong. We still need to speak the truth in love to these people. But can our motivation to do so be compassion, rather than conquest?

Jesus compassion wasn't just for those struggling physically, but especially to everyone struggling spiritually with sin and unbelief. He ate with the tax collectors and society's "sinners." He defended an adulterous woman, then encouraged her to leave her life of sin. He loved his enemies, asked his heavenly Father to forgive those who despised him, and went to the cross to pay for the sins of those killing him. That's compassion!

The word "compassion" literally means in Latin, *"to suffer with."* In his compassion, Jesus was willing to sacrifice for others, to suffer with

those suffering in sin. Even more, Jesus was willing to suffer for those who were suffering in sin, to set them free!

How can we have that kind of compassion for everyone? It comes from seeing everyone like Jesus sees them—as people ***"harassed and helpless"*** in sin, ***"like sheep without a shepherd."*** If we only focus on people's sin and its consequences, it's hard to feel compassion for them. But if we focus on the destructive influence that people's sinful nature, this sinful world, and Satan have on them, and us, it's so much easier to feel compassion for them and show compassion to them by loving them, encouraging them, helping them, and speaking God's truth in love to them!

If you found a little boy all alone in Wal-Mart with tears in his eyes and a look of terror on his face, crying out, "Dad?! Dad!?" Would you stick your finger in his face and reprimand him, "You foolish boy! It's your fault for wandering away from your parents! You're on your own, bub!" Of course not! Yes, it might have been the boy's fault for getting lost. But compassion for that lost child makes reuniting him with his father the most important thing! Likewise, if we see people caught in sin as lost sheep who need to be reunited with their shepherd; as lost children who need to be reunited with their Father, instead of treating them with anger or spite, compassion can flow out of our hearts, words, and actions! When our hearts are filled with Gospel-motivated compassion for people, we can see sinners not as adversaries, but as opportunities! And while our compassion for others will always be just a pale reflection of Jesus' compassion for us, it's still a reflection of Christ to the world!

But Jesus doesn't just feel compassion for people's spiritual needs. He also shows compassion by taking action. One of the ways he does that is through the Holy Ministry of his Church! In his human nature, Jesus knew that by himself he couldn't share the kind of compassion that every person in Israel and beyond needed. So he told his disciples, ***"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*** And then he revealed the good news: their prayers had been answered!

Because he was sending out the 12 of them as workers in his harvest field!

And for the last 2 millennia, God has continued demonstrating his compassion for people by calling men and women to serve as pastors, teachers, and staff ministers in the Holy Ministry! Willing harvesters for ripe harvest fields. Compassionate shepherds for helpless sheep. As Paul writes in Ephesians, ***“It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.”***

As our culture becomes increasingly disconnected and distrustful of organized religion, and clergy, some might doubt that that’s true. And yet, it all three of today’s readings, God shows compassion to people in need by calling and sending spiritual shepherds to guide, lead, train, and encourage his people! And why would he keep doing it if he didn’t have a compassionate purpose for calling and sending called workers to serve in the holy ministry?

How does the holy ministry display God’s compassion for people? While it’s always a little awkward to talk about why your own job is so important, let me name a few ways that pastors are reflections of God’s compassion. The pastor sits at the bedside of a dying Christian, reminding them and their loved ones of God’s perfect love and the eternal life, and eternal reunion that is to come. The pastor sits in your living room for 3 hours, just being present, and letting you voice your frustrations or grief, while pointing you to Christ. The pastor spends weeks counseling you with God’s Word when your marriage is falling apart, or you’re incapacitated by addiction. The pastor prepares multiple Bible studies, leads worship, writes a new sermon each week, baptizes babies and adults, and serves the Lord’s Supper, so that God’s people can be continually spiritually fed and have their faith nourished by Word and Sacrament. The pastor meets multiple times each week with the church’s leadership, to ensure that the ministry keeps moving forward and keeps the focus on Christ’s mission. The pastor strikes up conversations with strangers, follows up with worship guests, and equips and encourages God’s people to see themselves as everyday

evangelists in order to connect crowds of lost sheep without a shepherd to Jesus! The teacher and staff minister pour themselves into training the next generation to believe in Jesus, and be his messengers~

That’s what God has called called workers like me, and Ms. Anne, and soon to be staff minister Jarrett Mielke to do—to help shepherd the flock of the Good Shepherd! To bring in the harvest that God has made grow. So can I ask you to do me a favor today? Please, never apologize when you reach out, or stop by with your spiritual needs. Please, never tell yourself you’re not important enough, or that I’m too busy. I can honestly say, unless you’ve served in ministry, you have no idea how much your pastor or teachers think about you, worry about you, care about your spiritual life, and compassionately love you in Christ.

That said, can I ask another favor of you? Will you please forgive me? Please forgive me for all the times I haven’t always been there for you, forgot to get back to you, or responded to you with more frustration than compassion? Forgive me for the times that I may have given the impression I didn’t have time for you, or that you were more of a burden than a blessing. The reality is, as we’ll discuss more next week, the people that God sends into his holy ministry are sinners—sinners with limited time, patience, and understanding. Just look at the history of those 12 Apostles Jesus sent out! Even the called workers God sends out to shepherd his flocks are sometimes lost sheep without a shepherd.

Which is why, along with praying that God would send out more workers into his fields, see yourself as an answer to that prayer too! You also have been equipped to show compassion to others through the Gospel ministry we carry out here at Victory, and in our own personal lives as Christians! Just think of the compassion that Jesus has and has shown for you to give you eternal life! As Jesus says, ***“Freely you have received;”*** now, let’s go and ***“freely give.”***