

"Seeing the Lost"
Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

June 18, 2017

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

One of the things I noticed in our trip last February to visit our son, daughter, and granddaughter in Mexico City was the number of people there: 25 to 35 million people depending on whether you count just the people within the city limits or if you include the greater metropolitan area. It was interesting to watch all these people.

There were many white-collar workers dressed in business attire and many blue-collar workers dressed less formally. All of them packed the buses and trains of public transportation in what could have been the inspiration for the song "Taking Care of Business" by Bachman-Turner Overdrive. They were interesting to watch.

Then there were the poorer people: the street vendors and beggars. They could be a bit assertive in trying to get money from you. And there were the elderly and suffering. It was difficult to watch them or even make eye contact with people like them. It was all very uncomfortable.

Although we may not have near as many people here in Montana (just recently over one million), we have a wide variety of people and we do watch them. There are normal people (and, by "normal", I mean all people who are like us in looks, economic status, political views, religious beliefs, and so on). Not only do we like to see such people, but we like to associate with people like these people.

But there are other people to see. There are the poor people in the community. These are the people that sit by the entrance to Walmart and hold signs which ask for money; people that live in public housing or at the Great Falls Rescue Mission and cash welfare checks; and people who come to our church office to ask for food vouchers or gasoline vouchers.

There are Native Americans and other minorities that we see. We see the mentally ill who roam the streets and behave in very strange ways. There are many non-Christians in our community whom we see and who profess beliefs and live lives which are in conflict with the Word of God. The list of different kinds of people could go on.

What do we think when we see these people? How do we react? We can be very judgmental. "Those people sure have misplaced priorities. They never come to church. All they are interested in is sports, camping, and having fun."

We can become very annoyed. Those people are not like us, don't look like us, and don't act like us. We can feel very uncomfortable to be around people who are in need, knowing how much we have been blessed with. We can become critical of the people we see and say things like, "Instead of standing around outside of Walmart, begging for money, why not get a job? After all, the Bible does say, 'If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.'" (1 Thess. 3:10)

Although these may be natural reactions, they are not God pleasing reactions, but sinful reactions. You might think that's rather harsh evaluation, but consider the core meaning of sin. Sin is focused only on self and thinking, speaking, and acting accordingly. Remember how often Jesus' disciples fought about who was most important and first among themselves? In the same way, we want to be first. We want to be most important. We want to be served instead of serving. One of the ways we can boost ourselves up, either obviously or subtly, is by pulling others down. So we look and we judge, we criticize; we feel smug and superior. As Jesus condemned His disciples for such attitudes and behaviors, so He condemns you and me.

Notice how differently Jesus reacts to people in our text for today. Jesus has begun His great mission work. He is traveling throughout all the cities and villages. He is teaching, preaching, and healing. He is teaching the Word of God in the synagogues. He is proclaiming "the gospel of the kingdom." This is not good news of some upcoming political or military upheaval (which the people might have wanted). This was something better. This was not about a place coming – a kingdom – but of an activity starting – the rule or reign of God.

Into our world corrupted and broken by sin, the reign of God was entering through Jesus Christ and the restoration of all creation was beginning. As a sign of this activity, Jesus was healing “every disease and every affliction.” He was not doing this just to help the people (although He was doing that), but He was doing this to show that God was now taking control to overcome sin and all of its symptoms (such as diseases) and re-establish a new and holy creation, unaffected by death or devil and which will last forever. These healings were like previews of coming attractions or appetizers for a heavenly banquet.

Naturally, this preaching and healing attracted people. And not were all pure and pious people like you and me. There were the sick and suffering. There were the poor and needy. There was the riff raff who were there just to take advantage of Jesus’ generosity and get whatever they could from Him. In short, there were all the kinds of people that we run into every day.

Jesus’ reaction is interesting and instructive. No one would have blamed Jesus if He had blown off these people. He was a busy man on an important and urgent mission. Some of these people were loafers and losers, not worthy of His attention or His help. Yet, our text says, “[w]hen [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

This doesn’t mean Jesus just felt sorry for them or felt bad for them. It is much more. This was a deep visceral reaction. In our day, we feel things from our heart. In Jesus’ day, people felt things deeply from their gut. Jesus was not critical, judgmental, uncomfortable with these people. He was deeply moved by these people and their great need. Jesus saw them in the context of their need for help rather than His need for convenience. These people were truly suffering, regardless of their background. They were not so much bad people as they were people who had been harassed by life and left helpless and hopeless. Jesus saw them and cared.

You might wonder why Jesus felt such compassion to people who were obviously so unworthy and undeserving of it. The short and simple answer is: that’s how Jesus deals with all people, including us. We are a lot more like the people who annoy us and those on whom we look down than we are different. We may not be unbelievers but, due to sin, we sometimes think and act like unbelievers. We may not stand in a Walmart’s lot begging, but we have needs. We may not be part of a racial minority but we are part of the human race. We may not have the same sins and shortcomings as the people who annoy us and those on whom we look down, but we all have sin nevertheless.

And Jesus looks at us, as He looked at the crowds in His day, and does not become angry or annoyed. He does not become critical or judgmental. He does not look down on us and reject us. He has compassion on us. His compassion moves Him to action, not because we are sinless and worthy but in spite of our sinfulness and unworthiness. Paul writes of this in our epistle lesson for today, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” (Rom. 5:6-9)

All people – fine outstanding citizens as well as the dregs of society – have been forgiven of all their sin and made right with God. But many just don’t know it. So, in our text, Jesus dealt with their most pressing need – that God has taken care of their sin – rather than simply dealing with the symptoms of that need – sickness, affliction, poverty, and so on.

Jesus continued to establish the rule of God in this world by teaching, preaching, and healing. He chose and sent out twelve unique men to carry on this mission in a unique way with His authority – authority to preach and teach, as well as authority to heal, cast out unclean spirits, and even to raise the dead to life again.

Jesus would really gain a permanent foothold for the reign of God in this world by going to the cross and dying to negate the power of sin and death. He rose from death to life to assure all that this re-establishment of God’s perfect creation has begun. The devil was defeated. Now, all there

was to do was let people know of this reign of God so that they may believe and have a place in the new creation that was coming. For that, He calls you, me, and every Christian who already knows and believes this.

First, Jesus calls you to see people as He sees them: not with arrogance or criticism, but with compassion – the compassion of Christ. Having been a recipient of His compassion, now be a distributor of it. These people are not just “bad” people who are beneath us. They are sinners like you and me. Those whom we are critical or judgmental of may just be those who have been beaten up by life and are harassed and helpless. Show them Jesus’ care, compassion, and acceptance.

Second, while showing people Jesus’ care, compassion, and acceptance, also show them His salvation. Naturally, within your vocation, speak to the people you encounter about God’s forgiveness, new life, and eternal home in heaven because of Jesus’ perfect life in our place; His sacrificial death on the cross for our sin; and His glorious resurrection for us.

But Jesus also encourages us to see the big picture as well. The need for the reign of God to break into the lives of people extends far past the few people we encounter. Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” There are many more people who need to hear the message than we can possibly tell. So, Jesus says, “Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Pray that God calls and sends out pastors, missionaries, and others who have Christ’s authorities to preach the Gospel of the reign of God; to speak His forgiveness; to bring people into the kingdom through Holy Baptism; and to sustain people within the kingdom through the Lord’s Supper.

So, see people as Jesus saw them: with care and compassion. No matter their circumstances, these are people for whom Jesus bled and died for on the cross for their forgiveness. That gives comfort. Speak to people as Jesus spoke to them: about the coming reign of God. He has overcome sin and death and will eventually eradicate all of its side effects. That gives hope. Pray for people as Jesus prayed for them: that they may come to know and believe in God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and all that He has done for them. That gives assurance. And that is truly and helpfully and completely how to see the lost. Amen