

*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.<sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.<sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.<sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”*

<sup>10:1</sup>*He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.*

<sup>2</sup>*These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.*

<sup>5</sup>*These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. <sup>6</sup> Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. <sup>7</sup> As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ <sup>8</sup> Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. (Matthew 9:35-10:8)*

## The Compassion of Jesus

What is compassion? There’s an illustration I use in catechism and in Bible Information Class to explain it. If you’ve taken those classes with me, you’ve heard it. You’re in a store. You push your cart around a corner and there in front of you is a small child, maybe two or three years old. He’s all by himself and he’s clearly terrified. Somehow, he got separated from his mother. What do you do? Do you shrug your shoulders and say, “Aw, that’s too bad. I hope he finds his mom,” and go on? Of course not. You stop. You look around to see if mom is just in the next aisle. If you can’t find her, you put on your best mom or dad voice and you pick that little guy up and you tell him that we’re going to find mommy. If you don’t find her, you go find the manager and have him make an announcement over the loudspeaker. Why do you do all that? Because you have compassion on a terrified little child. Compassion is seeing someone hurt or in trouble and being moved to help them. Over the last year, my family and I have been on the receiving end of a great deal of compassion. During the COVID crisis, countless sick people have experienced the compassion of nurses and doctors and caretakers, many of whom they never met before they got sick. God built compassion into us. It’s part of what we sometimes call the image of God. It’s a remnant of the holiness that God designed us to have. It’s a reflection of God himself. Today, we see that in our gospel lesson. We see **the compassion of Jesus.**

### II.

Matthew tells us that Jesus went through all the towns and villages of Galilee preaching and teaching and healing people. The people flooded to him to hear and to be healed. Matthew says, **“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”** Jesus saw how hard life was and it moved him. **Jesus’ compassion is caused by our needs.**

Life hurts. It really hurt back then. This lesson focuses on physical illness and always in the past, when I’ve spoken of illness in ancient times, I’ve made the point that people back then died of things we cure with over the counter medicines today. But maybe I shouldn’t be so quick to say things like that anymore. If someone were to come to Livonia today with an instant, surefire cure for coronavirus, I think there’d be a pretty long line of people to get that cure— even if they weren’t sick. Who isn’t tired of the COVID pandemic? Life hurts. Well, imagine a world where there were hundred of viruses that killed people and no one knew what caused them or who was going to get them. Imagine a world in which simple cuts got infected because people didn’t understand what causes infection either, and people lost limbs or died. Imagine a world in which hospitals were not places you took sick people to get better. If you had a chance of getting better, you stayed at home and called the doctor to your house. You took people to the hospital to die. Imagine a world with no eyeglasses, so almost everyone became a least somewhat blind over the course of their life, a world with no insurance or welfare to take care of sick people, a world with bad nutrition and dangerous working conditions and no prenatal care to speak of. When Jesus came healing every sickness and disease, the crowds surged to him, even in little country villages. Who wouldn’t?

All that hurt was real. The people paid a price – they were harassed and helpless. That’s not a picture of faithful people patiently waiting for God’s help. Jesus saw the hurt and the longing in the eyes of the crowds and he had compassion on them. He has compassion on us, too. This world is broken and dying, so every single one of us suffers, sooner or later. Modern medicine does amazing things, but we still get sick and doctors can only do so much. In a world where you can’t turn on the TV without hearing more about COVID and second waves and infection rates spiking just when we thought things were getting better, in a world where demonstrations go on and on and I don’t know what will finally end them, it’s easy for our trust in God to fail us. We pay a price. We feel harassed and helpless.

Why does it have to be that way? Just like in Jesus’ day, the hurts and struggles are signs of a deeper spiritual sickness. COVID-19 is the symptom. The disease is sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke this world. Nothing works the way God designed it to, so we have pandemics and earthquakes and tornadoes. And they passed that sin on to every human being who came after them – except for Jesus – so every society drips with injustice. Every society has far more poor and powerless people than rich and powerful people. Every family and every marriage and every group of people has hurt feelings and injured pride. We make those things happen. We sin, and we pile up the hurt of the people around us. And they sin against us and add to our hurt. As bad as all that is, none of it compares to hell. That is the final effect of sin and every human being deserves it. We deserve it for our sin.

But not Jesus. Already in heaven before he entered this world, Jesus was filled with compassion. He looked down and he saw all that we sinners do to our lives and he was moved to help us. So he took on human flesh and lived the one life without sin in all of history. He did that in our place. It counts for us in God’s records. Then he died and he paid for all our sin and selfishness. He paid for all the hurts that we have inflicted on the people around us and for all the hurts that the people around us have inflicted on us. He died and paid for all sin. Then he rose and forgave us. He rose and conquered all that is wrong with this world. He promised that he will free us from this world, from all the sorrow and sadness and hurt. When we die, we will go to heaven where we will never feel pain again. And then when he returns he will raise us from the dead. He will make this world new. He will erase everything that’s wrong with this life and make us whole forever. Jesus has perfect compassion – that was God’s natural reaction to all the hurt we suffer here.

## II.

But Jesus did not only care about the life to come. If he had, he wouldn’t have healed all those people. He wouldn’t have driven out demons and even raised the dead. But he did all those things to alleviate suffering here because Jesus cares about both, our lives now and our eternal lives. Now, he did not take pain away, but he did provide for faith here while we suffer. He made sure his people were ministered to. **Jesus’ compassion is demonstrated in his calling.**

Jesus had an interesting analysis of the real problem his people faced. They were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. They didn’t have anyone to take care of them. That was the real problem, in Jesus’ eyes. Jesus would not have said that the problem that real sheep face is predators or lack of good pasture or drinking water. He would’ve said the issue is whether they had shepherds to take care of all those needs. He says the same about us. His solution is to provide shepherds – people to provide spiritual care to us while we live here. In our reading, he did that in multiple ways. First of all, he designated the twelve as apostles. We are all Jesus’ disciples. Disciples are learners and we all learn from him. But these twelve were special. The word apostle means someone sent on a mission. Occasionally, the Bible uses it for a missionary. But the twelve were sent out to do more. Jesus was calling them to found the New Testament Church.

In that sense, he was dealing not just with the crowds of Galilee who were thronging to him. He was dealing with the spiritual needs of all the billions of Christians who would come after him – including us. How so? The most obvious way is through the scriptures. We base our lives and faith on that word of God. We find our comfort and our healing in that word. The twelve apostles – including St. Paul who would be added later – were deeply involved in writing and collecting the New Testament for us. But there is another element here. Jesus was beginning the New Testament ministry. Now, when I say that, I’m not talking about an unbroken, historic line of succession. Rather, the way God designed his church, God gives the gospel to the whole flock – to all of us. But he always calls some to care for the sheep. How they do that varies from place to place and era to era. But always, God provides pastors – that word means shepherds – so that when his people hurt, they are

not harassed and helpless. They have someone to care for them. And Jesus himself works through the gospel those shepherds provide. He comforts us and strengthens our trust in him.

Jesus did also specifically take care of the sheep of his day. In this reading, he sent the twelve out to preach and teach and do miracles. He said, **“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.”** Because Jesus cares deeply about the way sin torments us here, he sent the apostles to provide some relief. But that work was tied to what he said right before: **“As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’”** Those miracles were signs that the Savior had come to take care of their greatest need: their sins. They were proof that the claims of the apostles were true. They were a jump start to the church of the New Testament era. But what do those miracles teach us? They show the importance of caring for each other on the way to heaven. Our Christian love and care show the truth of the message we proclaim. If we say, “Jesus loves you,” but we do nothing to help those in need, the Bible calls us hypocrites. The gospel changes us and it inspires us to care for each other.

But Jesus also did one more thing to show the depth of his compassion. He said, **“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”** Until our Lord comes back, the church will need pastors and teachers. And there will always be more unbelievers who need to hear that the gospel than there are believers to share it. So we will always need more missionaries, more witnesses, more evangelists. And there will always be a flock that is harassed and helpless, that suffers from life in a sinful world, that needs shepherds to care for it and protect it. The supply will always seem to be short. The other day, I looked at the picture of my graduating class that hangs above my desk. It was almost twice as big as the current classes at the seminary. But on every line, there are guys who are no longer in the ministry. The need for shepherds will not go away until Jesus returns. So Jesus tells us to ask God to send those workers.

Why does he do that? If Jesus knew how much the church needs workers, obviously, God the Father knows, too. But God gives us the privilege of sharing in the work. God invites us to bring this greatest spiritual need to him so that he can fulfill it. God lets us learn where our help is and who alone can provide for us, by putting us in the position of supplicants – of people who come to him for aid. Because our Father loves us, he will always provide the workers that we need. That’s true right here at Peace, right now, as we seek to fill the vacancy in our school. It’s true across the synod and around the world.

Trust his promise to work and provide. Trust it because we are his sheep. And there are so many things that get us down. There are so many ways that sin hurts us here. But Jesus never leaves us. He sees it all and his compassion moves him to work for our good. One way he does that is by sending pastors and teachers to constantly encourage us as we walk through this broken world to heaven. Through those workers, Jesus is caring for us. Trust his compassion. Amen.