

Sermon for April 21, 2024 - 4th Sunday in Easter

Matthew 9:35-38 (EHV)

Theme: The Compassion of the Christ.

- 1) See our Shepherd's compassion for us.
- 2) Share his compassion with others.

³⁵*Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.*
³⁶*When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd.* ³⁷*Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.* ³⁸*Therefore pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest."*

About 20 years ago, Mel Gibson produced "The Passion of the Christ" - a movie that brought many people to tears because of how graphically it portrayed Jesus' suffering and death. After seeing this movie, many wondered: "If Jesus was true God and could have stopped the Roman soldiers, why didn't he?"

Our sermon text answers this question with seven powerful words: "*he was moved with compassion for them.*" How much compassion did Jesus have? So much that he willingly endured God's wrath on the cross to pay for everyone's sins so that, whoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life. Let us consider this fantastic love under the theme: **The Compassion of the Christ.** *1) See our Shepherd's compassion for us. 2) Share his compassion with others.*

Part One: See our Shepherd's compassion for us.

Our text begins: *Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.*

Jesus preached a wonderful message for all: "*Repent, and believe in the gospel.*"ⁱ What was the Gospel Jesus wanted people to believe? That they could stop living as enemies of God - afraid of his wrath due to their sins - because God was reconciling the world to himself through Jesus' perfect life, innocent death, and glorious

resurrection. Through repentance and faith in this Gospel, the Holy Spirit changes us from being enemies of God to dearly loved citizens of his heavenly kingdom. Through faith in Jesus, we are at peace with God because God declared himself at peace with us through His Son's work. That is the good news Jesus wants the world to know.

³⁶When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus was moved with *compassion* for them.

There are three different words for compassion in New Testament Greek. The one used in our text is probably the strongest. It literally means to have your intestines moved - to feel so much mercy, pity, and love that you get sick to your stomach.

Jesus felt deep, gut-wrenching compassion for the masses that surrounded him. Why?

Because *they were troubled*.

The word translated as troubled comes from a word meaning "to be skinned or flayed." If you watched Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," you will undoubtedly remember how gory Jesus looked after his scourging. Well, this is what Jesus saw when he looked over the crowds surrounding him: souls that were all cut up, weak, and bloody because of sin and guilt.

They were *downcast*.

To be "downcast" comes from the imagery of being thrown down to the ground. When Jesus looked over the multitudes, he saw souls thrown down from the glory God had intended for them - so beaten up and bloodied by believing Satan's lies that they were on the verge of everlasting death. He saw people who, like lost sheep without a shepherd, wandered through this earthly life without anyone to help them. Those who claimed to be their shepherds (the religious leaders of the day) only made matters worse by telling people that it was up to them to save themselves.

That is what Jesus saw when He looked over the crowds surrounding him, and He could not stand it. As the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep, Jesus' heart was filled with such compassion for these helpless souls that he decided to do something: give up his life to save them.

We, too, were once like the people in the crowds surrounding Jesus; like harassed and helpless sheep, we were troubled and downcast. Our sins enslaved us to the devil with no hope of saving ourselves.ⁱⁱ Every inclination of the thoughts of our hearts was only evil all of the time.ⁱⁱⁱ Considering God our enemy,^{iv} we ran away from him like stupid, stubborn sheep – putting ourselves in danger of everlasting hell. Despite all that, Jesus felt such compassion for us that it compelled him to save us. He chose to be our shepherd and purchase us as his sheep. How? By paying the price needed to redeem us from our sins. He, the almighty Son of God, laid down his life - suffering *our* punishment in *our* place to pay for *our* sins and win the righteousness we need to be reconciled with God. Not only that, but he rose from the dead, proving that all sin has been forgiven. We are reconciled to God.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, laid down his life for us – not because we were good and worthy sheep that deserved his love and affection. No, as St Paul writes: *“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...”*^v

And Jesus, our Good Shepherd, didn’t just stop at paying for our sins. No, he actively sought us – calling out to us through the proclamation of His Word. The Holy Spirit moved us to heed Christ’s call – awakening repentance and faith in our hearts to receive him. He came to us through the sacrament of Holy Baptism – washing all our sins away and declaring us his own. And he continues to come to us through Holy Communion – offering us the very body and bloody he used to save us from our sins that we might be assured of his love.

That is the great compassion Jesus, our good Shepherd, showed us who were once lost, harassed, and helpless. Even though our wicked hearts are filled with many sins, Christ suffered, died, and rose again for you and me!

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, whenever you feel alone, harassed, and helpless in the world – at wit’s end because you don’t know what to do – don’t listen to the voices in the world calling you away from your Shepherd. No, call out to Jesus. Stay close to him. Why? Because he is your Good Shepherd who loves you so much that he laid down his life to save you. He will continue to watch over, protect, and guide you through life. Not only that, but he invites you to feel the same compassion for others that he has for you.

Part 2: Share His compassion with others.

For that reason, Jesus said to his disciples, *“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”*

Yes, there certainly are a lot of souls in this world who are more than ready to hear the Gospel. There are 8 billion people on this earth, and the vast majority (over 67%) don't consider themselves Christian. Many haven't even heard the Gospel!

And this sad truth plays out in our Canadian communities as well. Sure, there are a lot of people who may, for tradition's sake, belong to a church, but how many hurting people in our communities actually know the Gospel: that since Jesus paid for their sins, they don't have to be afraid of God or of what comes after death? The harvest is ripe - not just in the far-flung continents of Asia and Africa where Christianity is growing, but right here in Canada. All of you know people who are hurting because of their sins, whose consciences feel flayed, and whose hope our wicked world beats down. Without realizing it, their souls long to hear the comforting message of Christ's compassion, which he has given us.

That is why Jesus *said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. ³⁸Therefore pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest.”*

When Jesus tells his disciples to *pray* for workers, he is not saying, “After you are done praying for yourself, tack on this afterthought that somebody else should go out and tell people about me.” No, the Greek literally says: “Beg the LORD to send out workers!” There is a sense of great urgency in Jesus' choice of words. Beg for men and women willing to share the Gospel with others. Plead for them as a mother might plead for a specialist to see her terminally ill child. Why? Because many people are dying without Christ.

It is also interesting to note that when Jesus says, *“Pray that the Lord... will send out workers,”* he literally says, “Throw down workers.” Imagine building a sandbag wall to protect a neighbourhood from an approaching flood. You would want as many sandbags thrown down the line as fast as possible. This is the idea behind Jesus' prayer for workers in His kingdom: we beg God to throw them to us as fast as possible!

Do you know how the LORD answered the disciples' prayers for workers? The next verse after our sermon text says that the LORD commissioned his disciples to accomplish what they prayed for. The Lord does the same with us as well. No, most

of us are not called to be pastors, teachers, and evangelists, but as we pray for more workers in the harvest field, the Lord wants us to think about how we might join in this most critical work. He places his compassion for the lost in our hearts through the Gospel. We don't want anyone to die as a lost sheep, but all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Let this desire, then, not only move you to pray for the lost but also to support our church's mission efforts with the time, talents and financial blessings God has entrusted to your care. Let Christ's compassion move you to confess Christ boldly to those God puts in your life.

And don't let the fear of inadequacy keep you from sharing the Gospel. Remember what the LORD said to Moses when he felt unqualified to witness to Pharaoh: *"Who gave man his mouth?... Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."*^{vi} Remember also the promise Jesus made to his disciples when he sent them out: *do not be worried about how you will respond or what you will say, because what you say will be given to you in that hour. In fact you will not be the ones speaking, but the Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.*^{vii}

Brothers and sisters in Christ: never forget how great your Good Shepherd's compassion is toward you: he lay down his life for you – a stubborn and straying sheep - so you could live with him forever in paradise. Let that truth compel you to share this Gospel with others - first by praying that the Lord sends out more workers to witness the Gospel and then by being open to the opportunities Jesus gives you to confess Christ yourself. Amen.

ⁱ Mark 1:15 EHV

ⁱⁱ cf. Galatians 4:8 & Ephesians 2:1ff

ⁱⁱⁱ cf. Genesis 6:5; 8:21

^{iv} cf. Romans 5:10

^v cf. Romans 5:8,10, EHV

^{vi} Exodus 4:11-12 EHV

^{vii} Matthew 10:19-20, EHV