

Title: *The Compassionate Response*

Text: Matthew 9:35-38

Back in 1857, more than 150 years ago, an extraordinary thing happened in New York City. A great panic hit the stock market and the wealth and resources of many people vanished into thin air. Massive numbers of people were unemployed. Factories closed down, banks failed and railroads went into bankruptcy. Does this sound at all familiar or analogous to where we are today?

At the same time this was happening the Dutch Reformed Church was concerned that their church in what is now lower Manhattan was losing membership as people were moving out of the area. It was in that context that the Dutch Reformed appointed a layman by the name of Jeremiah Lanphier to try to visit the population of the area diligently in order to bolster church attendance. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Lanphier convened a noontime prayer meeting, every Wednesday, meeting once a week.

He made up a flyer and distributed it as an invitation.

HOW OFTEN SHALL I PRAY?

As often as the language of prayer is in my heart; as often as I see my need of help; as often as I feel the power of temptation; as often as I am made sensible of any spiritual declension or feel the aggression of a worldly spirit.

In prayer we leave the business of time for that of eternity, and intercourse with men for intercourse with God.

It then gave a few more details such as time and place and the purpose of his prayer meeting. On September 23, 1857, he opened the doors of his church and waited 5 minutes, then 10 nervously pacing the floor waiting for his first participants to show up. Finally at 12:30, the first person showed up followed by a few others for a total of 6. The next week there were 40. Then it was decided to meet daily and within 6 months, there were 10,000 businessmen praying daily and within 2 years, 1,000,000 souls were added to the church rolls in America.

Historian J. Edwin Orr writes, "There was no fanaticism, no hysteria, simply an incredible movement of the people to pray."

David Platt writes about the Welsh Revival which also was started in the prayers of a layman by the name of Evan Roberts. In the wake of this revival, a global movement was started and Christians began scattering to the nations. In the years that followed the Christian population in Indonesia tripled and in India it grew 16 times faster than the Hindu population.

10 years ago today an extraordinary event happened in our country that is being remembered today. An event that none of us will ever forget where we were and what happened when we saw those planes crash into the twin towers. I was sitting at my office in Greenbelt working on a sermon when someone called the church. I was trying to figure out how I could learn more. There wasn't a TV handy. Our internet wasn't really a viable option, then I realized that I did have a radio. I listened to WMAL in Washington as the first reports came in about a plane flying into the Pentagon. We did have one church member who worked at the Pentagon but she was safe. We had another who was a congressional staffer and his wife recounted later with tears in her eyes how in awe she was of the heroism of the men on United flight 93 who crashed the plane into a field near Shanksville, PA. She said, "They may have saved my husband's life." That plane was probably headed for either the Capitol or the White House, we'll never know which. Allyson and I had just started dating, Jonathan had just started Kindergarten. She

called me and asked if I could come get her because she was working in a federal building.

In the aftermath, there was brief moment of national unity and a spike in church attendance. It would be interesting to analyze why the spike didn't last, but that's not really our purpose this morning. Those people who were at work in the World Trade Center said goodbye to their spouses in the morning, not having any idea that they would never see each other again in this life. A few years after that, we had a policeman friend who was killed in the line of duty. I marveled at that time how policemen and firemen routinely kiss their wives good bye in the morning not really sure if they'll make it home in the evening or not.

We admire the heroism of the first responders who rushed into a burning and collapsing building, for the Todd Beamers who deliberately crashed an airliner so that it wouldn't inflict the damage that the evil-doers intended and we have compassion on the widows and widowers of those who died and those who lost friends, colleagues and loved ones on that awful day – that day that Alan Jackson described by asking *Where were you when the world stopped turning?*

I wonder if the reason that 9/11 didn't trigger a more massive revival in the churches like the revival of 1857 and the Welsh Revival had anything to do with prayer. I wouldn't dare offer a simplistic analysis of why things happen the way they do and why God moves the way He does. We do know that we are told repeatedly to pray. That's a vital part of the Christian life. If Christianity is a relationship in which God has reached out to us in the person of Jesus Christ and invited us into an intimate, dynamic, life-transforming relationship with him, doesn't it stand to reason then that prayer ought to be a part of that relationship?

In the text for this morning, Matthew brings us to an important transition point in the ministry of Jesus. There have been several stories of Jesus healing, teaching and driving out demonic spirits, and he is making his way through all the towns and synagogues of the Galilee, that region there mostly to the north and to the west of the Sea of Galilee.

Since it was the custom that any male who felt so led could stand up and share a word could do so, he had easy entree into the synagogues. The historian Josephus tells us that the Galilee was a crowded place. There were, by his count 204 villages each with no fewer than 15,000 persons. At the rate of two villages or towns a day, three months would be required to visit all of them. I don't believe that Jesus literally had to visit EVERY synagogue in the Galilee. It's like when your child tells you everyone is going to be there, it's just their way of saying, "Everybody who's anybody is going to be there and if I want to be somebody, I need to be there, too."

What's more important is to realize the kinds of activities that Jesus was involved in – teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. We understand instinctively that there is a difference between preaching and teaching. The teaching that Jesus did was in the synagogues. It was instructing people who already were a part of the family of faith in what it meant to be a follower of God. I can't imagine what an awesome experience it must have been to be sitting on the front row and listening to Jesus open up the Scriptures of the Old Testament about how they really point to him. Walking away with a deeper and renewed understanding of what it meant to be a part of God's people.

He preached the good news of the kingdom. There are several Greek words which mean preach. The word that is used here simply means to herald. It is the image of someone simply standing up and proclaiming good news, like the blast of a horn. Just making an announcement. Getting people's

attention. Proclaiming it the way it is. Then of course healing every disease and sickness. There is no sickness or disease that Jesus doesn't have the power to heal, no problem he doesn't have the wisdom to solve. He is announcing himself as the Messiah and letting them know that the kingdom of God has arrived in and through his ministry. Those things that burden and oppress people will now be addressed by Jesus Christ himself. The world is now in the process of being restored to what God wanted it to be at creation.

As Jesus is moving about throughout Galilee, he sees the crowds. He's out moving about and he can't help but notice the condition of the people, and looking at them, he's moved with compassion. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines compassion as: sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. I like that definition. I think it captures the essence of what compassion is even from a Biblical, New Testament perspective. It's not just saying, "Wow. That really stinks. It must be terrible being you." It is entering into someone else's pain and really feeling it and resolving to do something about it. Rather than focusing on a dictionary definition of parsing the Greek word out let's look at some pictures of compassion and what compassion does.

There's another place in both Matthew and Mark where this form of the word compassion is used in the Greek. It's in Matthew 14 and Mark 6. Jesus has been giving of himself in ministry and because he is fully human, he gets to a point where he just needs to get away for a time of rest and relaxation. They get in the boat to go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and when they land on shore, the crowds he was trying to get away from are there to greet them. The reaction of most of us would be the same as the disciples. Won't these people ever leave us alone!? What can we do to get rid of them? Send them away.

Scholar and author D. A. Carson tells of a time when he and a friend were going to the beach for some much-needed peace and quiet, but when they got there they found a horde of high school kids celebrating graduation with lots of beer, loud music and, shall we say, public displays of affection.

He writes, "Deeply disappointed that my evening's relaxation was being shattered by a raucous party, I was getting ready to cover my disappointment by moral outrage. I turned to Ken to unload the venom but stopped as I saw him staring at the scene with a faraway look in his eyes. And then he said, rather softly, 'High school kids — what a mission field!'"

When Jesus saw the crowds, both Matthew and Mark tell us, "He was moved with compassion." So much compassion that he not only taught them some more, but went on to perform one of his greatest miracles. When the disciples tried to send the people away again, he said to them, "Just go see what's out in the crowd and bring it to me and we'll feed these people." 5000 men were fed plus women and children with 12 baskets of crumbs left over because Jesus was moved with compassion.

That same word is used in the parable of the Good Samaritan. When the man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked, beaten, robbed, and left for dead, it was the compassion of a despised Samaritan that moved him to take the man to the nearest inn, pay all of his bills and say if that's not enough, I'll settle with you next week when I come back through," while the religious leaders didn't want to risk becoming "unclean" by their contact with him.

That word is also used in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Luke records for us, "²⁰ So the prodigal son] got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called

your son.'²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.'²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate."

That compassion moved the father to see the broken, empty shell that used to be his son and welcome him back in the family. It was the lack of compassion in the older brother that moved him to say, "I hope he gets what's coming to him. He's got a lot of nerve showing his face around here."

When you see people who are far from God living like people who are far from God, are you more like Don Carson or his friend Ken? Are you more like Jesus or his disciples who just wanted to get rid of the people, you might understand their sentiment. Are you like the people who couldn't be bothered with the man who had been robbed and beaten or are you like the Samaritan who although he was a part of a despised group of people was moved with compassion? Are you like the father who couldn't give up on his son or are you like the older brother who resented every moment of his life and was royally ticked off when the younger brother was shown mercy? Maybe one of the things that we love most about Jesus is that when he sees us, he looks at us with the kind of compassion that enters into our pain and suffering and is willing to give of himself to meet the need.

When you see children in the 2/3 world living in dire poverty, are you moved with the kind of compassion that would lead you to consider modifying your lifestyle so that you can sponsor some of them through any of a number of reputable agencies? When you see drug addicts who have gotten to the end of their rope and realize they need help, can you look past whatever disgust you may have at their moral failure and see them with compassion and be there for them?

Jesus viewed them as harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd. NIV says harassed and helpless, NASB says "distressed and downcast." Downcast is a deadly position for a sheep to be in. A sheep can fall down and not be able to get back up and if the sheep can't get back up, they can die for a number of reasons. Jesus looked at these crowds. The present religious establishment was no help to them. It would be as likely to look down its nose at them as it would be to do anything that would really help them or give them hope. Jesus condemned the religious establishment for putting a heavy load on men's backs and then doing nothing to help them lift that load.

To say that they are without a shepherd, look at all of things that a good shepherd does in Psalm 23. If I say because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. To be without a shepherd is to have all kinds of needs and desires and have no way of fulfilling them. If he makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters, he's taking me into places of abundance and safety. What's the opposite of that? Lack and danger. If a good shepherd anoints the head with oil, to have no shepherd is to have those needs untended to.

Jesus saw the horrible condition of the people and he was moved with compassion and what was his response to the disciples. It wasn't throw yourself headlong into the needs of the people and burn yourselves out. That may not have been a bad thing. It wasn't empty out your bank account and give all the money to meet these needs. He did tell the rich young ruler to sell everything and give to the poor and some of us may need to simplify our lifestyle because we haven't been giving the way we should or could.

His word to the disciples was pray. Not just in some glib way, "Oh, just pray about it." Make it the cry of your heart that God would send people out into the harvest field. Those of you with agricultural backgrounds know the urgency of the harvest that when it's harvest time, you need all hands

on deck and there's an urgency within that narrow window to do what needs to be done.

Platt concludes the book *Radical* with a 5 step plan. I'll major on three of them Read your Bible, pray and place yourself in a different context. You can't pray for God to send someone else someplace you're not willing to go. I pray that we know the joy of being an integral part of God's world-wide harvest in a way we never have before.

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