

Second Sunday after Pentecost

COMPASSION THAT MOVES (Matthew 9:35-10:8)

By Shively Smith

Compassion. I am not always sure Christians understand the full weight and work of its meaning. I remember growing up hearing the phrase “moved to compassion” touted in church and family conversations. As my childhood experiences revealed, compassion is often described as a state of being or feeling in which something has occurred to move someone to feel sympathy, empathy, perhaps even pity for someone or something else.

Since the inception of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Christians have struggled with their role in shaping a society that cares for those who are sick and in need. In essence, we have struggled to understand the work and responsibility of Christian compassion in issues of healthcare and policy. Should this responsibility be shared by all and secured by the government or should it primarily be the domain of people of faith and those moved by a higher calling to mercy and healing?

While there are no easy solutions to the issue of healthcare in America, there are contributions that biblical notions of Christian compassion can offer the conversation. What exactly is the Biblical call to compassion and what does it require of us emotionally, physically, socially, and politically?

In the Gospel of Matthew, the word for “compassion” (*esplagchnisthe?*) occurs only five times with Matthew 9:35-10:8 representing the first occurrence. Each time the language of compassion appears in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is the one feeling it after he has observed the state of those around him. He feels compassion for people afflicted physically and socially. Each time he is portrayed as making concrete strides to remedy their affliction. In Matthew 14:14, Jesus feels compassion for the sickly crowd. He begins to heal those ill among its membership. In Matthew 20:34, Jesus feels compassion for two blind men and he heals them both. In a slightly different situation in Matthew 15:32, Jesus states aloud to his disciples that he has compassion for the crowd, which has followed him for three days without food. He says, “I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” In this way, Jesus demonstrates concern about a future probability that endangers his followers.

In today’s passage, Jesus’ compassion is in response to not just illness or the lack of food, but the situation of vulnerability. He is moved by those who apparently live on the edges of society because of illness, disability, ostracism, and social convention that renders some people

“harassed and helpless” (9:36), particularly in Judean Jewish life (10:5-6; cf. Matt 28:18-20).

In the larger storyline of the Gospel of Matthew, this week’s text appears in the first cycle of Jesus’ miracle stories. It is wedged between two major discourse sections, the Sermon on the Mount discourse (Matthew 5-7) and the mission discourse (Matthew 10:1-11:1). Accordingly, Matthew 8 and 9 represent a pivot in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life. Up to this point in the gospel, readers have only been told of Jesus’ miraculous deeds and responses to human suffering (Matthew 4:23-25), but the gospel has yet to portray specific instances or express Jesus’ reasons for providing miraculous remedies until Matthew 8.

When specific accounts of Jesus’ miraculous stories finally begin to be rehearsed in Matthew 8, frequently those needing assistance approach Jesus for help (Matthew 8:2, 5, 19, 25, 28; 9:18, 27). Those in need alert Jesus to their problems and then he responds accordingly. In Matthew 9:36, the scenario changes. Those afflicted are not the ones alerting Jesus to their difficulties. Rather here, Jesus himself displays an awareness and recognition he has not yet acted upon.

Compassion in the Gospel of Matthew is not simply feeling sympathy and empathy, but it is acting concretely on the behalf of the afflicted. Because Jesus is the only person explicitly named as showing compassion in the Gospel of Matthew, it has messianic significance. Yet, Jesus’ messianic compassion extends beyond him to the work of those who follow him and into the life of the communities they enter.

In Matthew 9:35-10:8, there is a lot happening. While Jesus travels, he teaches, proclaims, and heals along the way. Jesus summons his inner circle of disciples only to dispatch them to continue and expand his endeavor of teaching, proclamation, and healing (10:1, 7-8). Jesus establishes the scope and expands the scale of his endeavors through the appointments of his disciples. He sets geographic boundaries by instructing his disciples to “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5-6). Jesus’ commission of the twelve continues Jesus’ messianic acts of compassion. On first glance, it appears Jesus is laying groundwork to launch his own healthcare program that responds to the difficult and oppressive realities of others. He recruits and assigns people to execute it across the region.

The Night Ministry’s Outreach Bus in Chicago represents efforts that continue the work of moving compassion depicted in this Second Sunday of Pentecost text. You see the volunteers and workers exercising agency to equip and board the bus and to take provisions to those they know are in need. They know where the need is geographically. They journey to the edges and alleys of the city to provide some relief in form of healthcare, meals, housing assistance, and human connection. Like the responsive nature of Jesus and the disciples as they travel, there is a kind of awareness that is being practiced about the state of the local community and the ways the church can respond that is helpful, even when it cannot remedy the problem entirely. As one of the workers said, “We don’t really supply that much, but to them it is really necessary.”

The essentials of life are not just healing the ailment but also letting those who are weary and in pain know that they are seen. Moving compassion is about the action of seeing those who are not often seen. As the Outreach Bus leaders demonstrated, it is about remembering the names of those who often go nameless and recognizing the presence and absence of people society has forgotten. It is caring enough to get on the bus and leave your warm places behind to stand in the cold weather with those who have no other place to go.

Today's scripture is a true witness to what the Pentecost season should be about. Pentecost is not simply about Christians recognizing how God has empowered us through the Holy Spirit to be bold and courageous for the sake of the Gospel message. This is not a season of empowered and inspired individualism. This is a season of recognizing we have been empowered to see the world around us, particularly the people in the world often overlooked and ignored, and to act on their behalf in ways that address the circumstances that endanger their lives and communities. After all, Jesus' compassion for others is always sparked by a single observation, which is that "others" are "harassed and helpless" and we must do something to address it. What authenticates Christian compassion is the action that accompanies the one feeling it, not the emotion alone. Is compassion on the move in and around you? What does your compassion move you to do?

Study Questions

1. Where are the edges of your local community in need of Christian compassion?
2. What are some concrete actions your community can take to exercise a compassion that is active and not just emotive?
3. What have been moments of compassion you have felt? Name an instance when you actually acted on the compassion and name an instance when you did not act. Consider why.

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