

Gut Reaction

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Slide: Dad

This is my Dad. His name was Bill. Actually, his name officially was Billy, but you can probably guess that lasted until he was about 8 years old. I never knew anyone who called him Billy when he was an adult and if you did, you probably got a few words from him about that. This picture shows my Dad as exactly who he was. He always wore a hat; he was always planning for a big camping trip, he always loved the outdoors, driving that big blue 1963 Chevy Truck all around with the floorboards practically rusting out. I'm a lot like him actually. I love the outdoors just like him. I love serving Christ just like him. And, I have the same work ethic just like him. My Dad Bill died in 1989 at age 56. My life was never the same after he left. For those who miss their Fathers today on this Father's Day, may God comfort you and give you sweet memories to fill this day.

One thing my Dad did for me I will never forget. I had a big decision to make about going to college. I remember sitting on my twin bed with the big purple comforter and my Dad came in and sat beside me. I really wanted to go to college but where to go and where to apply was a difficult decision. I asked him about an ELCA college called Pacific Lutheran University, where I knew the music program was amazing. He said:

"Trust your gut. What does your gut tell you?" That was my Dad. He was very methodical, not very emotional, and supremely good at numbers unlike me, but he also felt his way into doing things he thought was right. He often just trusted his gut. Trust your gut he said. So, I did and I majored in music at PLU. I'm glad I did that. It's what ultimately led me to where I am now and who I am now.

Slide: Sheep

"Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless..."

Jesus had compassion on them. What is compassion? Most dictionaries would use synonyms such as “having sympathy or pity” upon someone or “expressing concern for those who are suffering.” These definitions are close to what compassion is, but they are not perfect descriptions. Some would say pity is different than compassion, that compassion has a response unlike pity. I feel pity is more of an emotion while as compassion requires action. And, here in Matthew’s Gospel we hear this word right near the start of today’s lesson – compassion – Jesus had compassion. What does it really mean that Jesus had compassion on those he saw?

Slide: Compassion

The Greek word for compassion is *Symponia*, at least that is the Greek word here in the New Testament. But, it doesn’t mean pity or sympathy. The root of this word means, “to be moved in your guts”. Jesus has a gut reaction to those who had need. And, almost literally speaking you can imagine it is a visceral reaction to those Jesus clearly loved those who he saw on the margins, those who were harassed and helpless.

Put yourself in their place. Have you ever felt harassed? Was there ever a time helplessness crept into your life? No doubt each of us can remember a time when we were harassed or helpless, in some way or other. We have all known what helplessness feels like such as when a loved one suddenly is hospitalized, or a child is bullied at school, or the people at your workplace has you so beaten down you wonder how you can function. Jesus saw the people and could see their need, their want, and their desire for healing. He was moved in his guts.

But, that’s not pity. Pity is something you can have and not respond. “Oh, I pity you,” you may say to a friend who’s having a hard time. But then, you are off and away. Compassion takes action. It takes doing. It takes being moved in the guts. So, here Jesus, we think will act, right? And, one may even think that the action Jesus would take as the Lord of the Universe is to go into the crowd and heal them.

Up until now, Jesus had been doing just that. In last week’s Gospel reading, Jesus healed a woman who had been hemorrhaging, who upon just touching the edge of Jesus’ cloak, was healed. Jesus also raised a little girl from the dead in just a few sentences later in this very Gospel called Matthew.

Jesus is the one who is moved in his guts, going from town to town, healing, proclaiming a new reign, bringing the Good News for all to hear. So, one would think that he would be the one to have compassion on the crowd and heal them. Yet, he doesn't. Instead, he does something else in his compassion. He commissions others to do it. He calls his new disciples, practically new in following him, to do what he is doing out there.

Slide: The Harvest is Plentiful

The Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus the Christ has come, as it turns out, not to solve humanity's problems for us, but to encourage and empower us to solve them, in effect recruiting us into becoming full participants in God's work of compassion, love and redemption. Wow! And, this is what he commissions for them to do: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons". Oh, well...that's all!? And, it's not that they are a particularly impressive bunch of disciples. Check out the list: Peter, who later denies Jesus when Jesus is arrested; Judas, he's a betrayer; and yet, here he is doing some healing and transforming along the way. Then, there are some fisherman by trade, not that there is anything wrong with that, but raise the dead? Then, there is Matthew, a Tax Collector whom most people despise because of his occupation; and Simon the zealot. Zealots wanted violence against Rome as a way of solving things. So, this motley crew of disciples going out in the way of compassion, moved in their guts, telling of the Good News of Jesus and proclaiming healing? Well, now, that's pretty amazing.

The theme here in Matthew's Gospel shows us that God is partnering with us, expecting us to do the hard work of feeling that gut response of those who are in need to hear a word of grace, because we after all, are now Christ's disciples. This motley crew here, we are now the called out ones to do the same as those first disciples did. But, this means that the lesson we hear from Jesus today through Matthew's Gospel is a source of both comfort and conviction. The scope of Jesus' ministry and of God's love is expansive. As it later says in the Gospel, first they go to the sheep of Israel, but by the time we get to the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus calls them and us out to all nations. God's response of compassion, healing, and salvation is wider than we know and sometimes want.

Slide: New Staff Pic

Today, we are installing four new staff at St. John's. Thank you, Jesus! But, think on this: I am now the only person on staff who was here before the pandemic began, with the exception of Linda, who was a wonderful sub organist for us and would accompany our choir. Today, all of our staff is either recent or new. Today, we welcome Matt, our new Children, Youth and Family Minister. We welcome Mark, our new Music Director. We welcome Lisa, our new bookkeeper. And, we welcome Linda officially today as our organist/pianist, technically anyway. All our other wonderful staff began here either during the pandemic or as we were coming out of it. And, it is because of your generosity, dear church, your love for the Gospel and of this faith that brings this energy here. And, it is the compassion of Jesus that brings us to this moment. It is your gut reaction to make this church what it is. It is the deep rooted, what are we doing, how can we do this all together kind of gut reaction. What is our future?

So, I ask you as we begin this exciting time together with new staff to let us as a whole church "trust our gut" as our Lord did with his disciples. Unlike the rest of this staff, most of you have been here a long time, some of you forever since the cradle. This is the time now to stretch our legs and see where it is the Spirit of Christ is calling us to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons." God is calling us, all of us, not merely a few staff, but all here; however we must discern together that vision for the future. We will soon be entering our 150th year. There is no better time than to see what God calls us to together as the whole people of God in Christ Jesus.

Slide: St. John's Mission Statement

One other thing that I think we can take from this Gospel reading today from St. Matthew. This is often missed in the Gospel when we don't read it as a whole. And indeed, it's such a tiny change in the text that most people wouldn't even notice it. In this chapter of Matthew, when he sends his disciples out to do his work, Jesus calls them disciples. A disciple is a learner, a student and a follower. Followers don't necessarily lead. They follow. They do as they are instructed or as they are educated to do. And, at the start of the 10th chapter of Matthew, as the disciples are sent out and named, in verse two actually, they are suddenly called "apostles". An apostle is not a learner. They are a messenger and indeed, that is what the word means - messenger. The followers of the Way, these disciples are no longer just that, but they are now messengers of the Good News.

We, too, are not merely followers, learners or disciples of Jesus. We are also apostles, messengers of Jesus, for we must continue the work of Jesus, of what he began. We enter the cruciform life, from death to life, and to death and life again and again. We do not remain passive hearers of God's call and mission but we take on this mission together, and it is an active, breathing, living from the gut kind of mission.

So, what is your "gut" telling you today? In what way are you, and me, and us to be the compassionate apostles to the harassed and helpless of this world? The Lord of the harvest is sending us. Let's respond in compassion to the needs of the world. Amen.