

“The Compass of Compassion”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Second Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Romans 5:1-11 and Matthew 9:35-10:4

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:1-11

Then 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, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

Matthew 9:35-10:4

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you give us the living word and together we reflect upon it, we listen for the presence of your Spirit and you call us to respond. May the words I share be an invitation to do so. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

When I first read this morning's verse about Jesus feeling a sense of compassion, it brought back an event I went to in April called "The Festivals of Faith". People in all different fields of theology and economics and research spoke on the topic of compassion and I think I have shared some of that with you. The very event it brought to mind was the afternoon we heard from a post-doctoral student from Northeastern University who shared the poignant story of how his interest in compassion came to be a direction for his life. He said, "The first week of college, I anxiously walked into my psychology class for the first time. I looked all around at my classmates. They looked so confident and I felt so intimidated. The professor began the class by handing out 3 x 5 cards and asked each one of us to write down the voice that we heard in our heads every day, the voice saying things we wish we didn't hear. He collected the cards and then read them aloud anonymously." He said, "It was heartbreaking. People had written things like, 'You aren't worthy to be loved.' 'You will never be good enough.' 'You will never amount to much.' 'It's only going to get worse.'" He said, "I no longer felt separated from the other students. I felt connected by an invisible thread, but the sad part was, I felt connected by feelings of doubt, worry and self-criticism. I thought, how different it would be if we learned how to support one another. And so now the focus of my work is to research how to help people be more compassionate, and how, in turn, it helps them heal as well."

Jesus clearly understood the importance of compassion. Matthew tells us he had been healing and helping the blind, the bleeding and the blaspheming. Today we heard that Jesus continues on that path, going out among the cities and villages, teaching and curing. But that when he saw the crowds he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. I think there are two powerful points being made in this verse: One is the response of compassion and care and the other is more of a political nature. Ken Bailey is an American pastor who recently died. He was a professor in the Middle East. He talks, in his book [The Good Shepherd](#) about the role of shepherds in the Bible. They are to be the ones who seek out the lost, feed them when they are hungry, lead the sheep with wisdom and concern and care. It is Bailey's theory that this comment about the praise of the shepherds is a condemnation of the Pharisees and Sadducees who have neglected their leadership roles. The Romans are in charge of the government and the patronage system. The leaders of faith are so focused on how they can keep or gain power that they are not bothering to care for the people. They act like shepherds who aren't tending their sheep. **1**

But it's more than condemnation. Jesus wants to help, support and lead the sheep, to help those who feel lost or alienated or sick. He wants to offer them peace of mind and heart, but he knows he can't do it all. So he calls out the disciples by name and sends them forth into the world to be those who carry out the work. He calls them to heal and cure, listen and care, and he tells them to travel lightly. He also tells them to stay where you are welcomed, but feel free to move on when you are not. When you are not welcomed, take off your sandals, shake the dust off your feet and move on. So his call is to a new understanding of the kingdom of God, not about rules and laws, but about relationships.

Not long ago on 60 Minutes there was an episode about someone whose story reflected in so many ways what Jesus was talking to them about. It's the story of Hamdi Ulukaya. He's the founder of Chobani Yogurt. He was born in Turkey into a family with shepherds. He learned to make yogurt from the milk of the family's goats and sheep. He also had a deep concern for his people, the Kurds. They were being attacked and he wrote articles about civil rights and it did not fly well. So he realized it would be best to leave Turkey and he emigrated here. With little money and no English, he found his way. He spent the next ten years, studying, working on a dairy farm and starting a feta cheese business. One day he spotted an ad that said "fully equipped yogurt plant for sale"--an 85-year-old factory owned by Kraft Foods. Kraft Foods had decided to get out of the yogurt business. He couldn't believe the price, either. So he went to the small village in New York to see it. He found the last five employees of the company shutting the plant down. He said, "I remember it like yesterday. The sadness in this whole place. Two hundred people had lost their jobs." He got a loan, bought the building and hired four of those people that were there that day to help him restart the plant.

After two years he figured out the magic formula for his yogurt and he started production and it took off. Soon they required more—more machines, more people, more milk from the farms around them. The number of employees went up to 600 and still counting. Anyone in New Berlin who wanted to work could find a job at Chobani. But it wasn't enough. So he went to Utica, New York, and talked to those at a refugee settlement center. They were having trouble finding people work. The stumbling blocks were language and transportation. But he was undeterred. He hired translators. He now has 19 of them working for him. And buses to pick them up. He offered hope to these refugees who had lost their families, their homes and their way of life and helped them find a new life. He said, "When you get a refugee a job, they are no longer a refugee." They needed more room and more space, though. So he built another plant in Idaho. It has 1000 employees and it has re-energized Twin Falls, and things were going very, very well.

But they hit a challenge. It wasn't about the yogurt, it was about the employees. One of the radical newspapers had claimed that "they brought in refugees and crime and tuberculosis." He and the mayor received death threats. But the mayor and the governor backed him completely and publicly. The governor said, "his concern for his employees, whether they are refugees or folks born ten miles from the plant, his compassion is no different." It took a long time to resolve the situation. And when Hamdi was asked about how he felt, he said "it was an emotional time. People lash out at you and you are only trying to do something right and there's not much more you can do." As I thought about that, I thought about the passage from this morning. It was if in some ways he understood what Jesus was saying. Some will not accept you, so just shake the dust off your feet and move on.

A year ago he gave 10% of his equity in Chobani to his employees. He said, "it's not a gift. It's the right thing to do. It belongs to them." He knows that without them there would be no Chobani. And then the journalist asked him what the word "Chobani" means and it seemed like the connection to this morning's passage was providential. He said, "Chobani means shepherd. It's a very beautiful word. It represents peace and it means a lot to me because I come from a life with shepherds and mountains." And I thought Hamdi is a person with compassion who seeks to bring people out of difficulty into a new life. He listens and he cares. He takes people who are broken and crushed in spirit and offers them a new life. **2**

What occurred to me in thinking of this story and things going on today, is that being broken-hearted can mean two different things. We can be broken-hearted and hurting and struggling to find hope. But we can also be broken in our hearts, if our focus instead is to judge and condemn others and we lose the ability to care about others. And that's a difficult thing. Jesus was distressed that the leaders did not seem to care about the needs of their own people. And as people of faith we need to remember that we are called to respond to those in need. We are called to have compassion. It helps to build community. Indeed the word, itself, compassion, is a word of movement. It's roots in English mean to suffer with. In Greek it means your insides respond. Your gut reacts in the innermost part of your being.

Paul Condon, the post-doctoral student at Northeastern, also told us that day that the need for compassion is critical for our world today. He found his challenge in the words of the Dalai Lama who says that indeed “compassion is basic for human survival.” Being connected helps us to see with new eyes. Sometimes it just helps us to know that we are not alone in our struggles or pain.³

This week was a difficult week for our nation. We were all stunned by the shooting of those from government who were just simply practicing on a baseball field. It was a time when people realized that we need to remember that what we say matters and how we live matters and whether we love matters and whether we care and how much that matters. Jesus understood this. He understood that it was relationships, not rules, that bring us into our deepest connections with God and one another. To have compassion helps us to connect, to find meaning and purpose, to heal and to find hope. When we have compassion we become like Christ. When we help others, we often help ourselves and transform the world. Jesus said, “I will not leave you desolate. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, will come and be with you” and bring us peace from beyond this world. May we hear and respond to the call to be the blessed peacemakers in this aching world and help to transform it. Amen.

1 Bailey, Ken, *The Good Shepherd*,¹ *The Good Shepherd: A thousand-year journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament*, Intersity Press, 2014.

2 CBS 60 Minutes episode --Chobani's billionaire founder on creating jobs in America” a script from “Chief of Chobani,” April 9, 2017. Steve Kroft, correspondent. Michael Rey and Oriana Zill Granados, producers.

3 Paul Condon, Post-doctoral student, Northeastern University, as shared at Festivals of Faith, Louisville, Kentucky, April 21, 2017.