

Third Sunday After Pentecost – 2023

Exodus 19:2-8

Romans 5:6-15

Matthew 9:35—10:20

One of the most vivid, descriptive phrases in all of Christianity is this one: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

Have you ever felt harassed and helpless? Life in this world is not one elongated day at the amusement park. The man Lot lived in Sodom. When two angels visited his home all the men of the city gathered at his door and demanded that Lot produce them so that those men might gratify themselves sexually. Lot was so out of his mind over this that he offered them his two virginal daughters instead. That’s what it’s like to be harassed and helpless. Samson loved a woman who betrayed him. He told Delilah the secret of his strength and she used it against him. The love of Samson’s life had his hair cut, then she tormented him (probably verbally, perhaps physically) and left him at the mercy of his enemies, who gouged out his eyes. That’s what it’s like to be harassed and helpless. Joseph was nearly killed by his brothers and sold into slavery. The mistress of the house in which he served attempted to seduce him and upon being rebuffed, she leveled false charges against Joseph that landed him in prison. That’s what it’s like to be harassed and helpless.

At least one of you has languished in the hospital with your own immune system attempting to kill you. At least one of you bears the burden of a psychological affliction that takes your mind captive to unwelcome voices. At least one of you has suffered unspeakable harm at the hands of your father. Have you ever felt harassed and helpless? Have you known the turmoil of insecurity? Have the dark clouds of depression hung over your heart, either by virtue of the sin you have committed or the sin that has been committed against you? The world, the devil and our own sinful flesh – an unholy trinity – the three of them attack us in a multitude of ways, leaving distressed hearts in their wake. Addiction, family members who cut off relations, bosses or co-workers who make your job miserable, living paycheck to paycheck, friends who gossip about you; who knows what landmine is hidden beneath your next step. Culturally, Christian wisdom is not just being disinvited from the American party, it is being openly attacked. In one sense, that is the Christian lot in this life. We should, truly, expect nothing less. Nonetheless, it is disconcerting when that which serves humanity so well is abandoned and that which is so clearly evil is embraced, celebrated.

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” What did our Lord see as He gazed upon those He loved? Did He see the forces at work in their lives, their fears, their struggles? Did He see the craft of the enemy to eliminate hope, to eliminate courage, to eliminate brotherhood? Did Jesus see the vapid theology that was being fed to them, the Pharisaical works-righteousness that severely clouded God’s grace? Jesus saw all of that, and more. The Lord Christ was immersed in our life. When Jesus looked out on the crowd, He saw them. Completely, thoroughly, precisely; He saw them, individually and corporately; and He had compassion.

How many of y'all like it when someone shows you compassion? Yeah? When someone genuinely sees you and relates, when you can tell that they understand your circumstance and feel for you, when empathy is sincerely directed your way – that's great, right? Your wife, your husband, your bff – they affirm that you are not alone, their compassion buoys you, lifts you up. Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion for them. It wasn't an empty emotional moment for our Lord. The Son of God had not come to experience emotions; He had come to act. Jesus acts in a way that is congruent with what He saw. He immediately turns to His disciples and tells them about the harvest, tells them to pray, and He sends them out. He sends them out with His grace. Jesus sends His disciples out with His authority. He sends them out to proclaim the kingdom, to heal the sick, to cast out unclean spirits, to engender hope, to engender brotherhood, to forgive sins and to engender courage, faith, awareness of God's presence.

Compassion; do you need it? Are you a robot or are you a human being? Have you sinned against God and against your neighbor? Can you be honest about that? Do you intend to trot out your own righteousness before God when you die or do you need the righteousness of One greater than yourself. Do you believe that it was Pontius Pilate who ultimately determined whether Jesus should live or die – or was it the Lord Himself, who saw you, harassed and helpless, and laid down His life to save you? Was it Judas, or the lying witnesses at Jesus' trial, or a Roman battalion who robbed the Lord of His life or was it His heart's desire to sacrifice Himself for you, out of divine compassion, to give Himself to the whip and the thorns and the spikes for the harassed and helpless? Jesus sacrificed Himself for you because He saw *you* in all of your unique specificity and was moved with compassion.

There are two camps in this world, two camps that are now, and will forever be, in conflict. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are in conflict. Our souls are laboring because we're in the middle of this conflict. Our old, sinful nature wants to be comfortable here. To be comfortable, the church has to compromise. Do you think that that's what God wants? Do you think that it will be good for those who are harassed and helpless for the church to compromise with the world and its agenda? Two camps are in conflict. Let's be clear: We are not sheep without a shepherd. We have a Shepherd, a Good Shepherd. His compassion has built this church. This is a fortress of faith, a citadel of safety for those who are harassed and helpless. Christ built this church and every other just like it. Christ's compassion is not just a distant thing in the past, it's ongoing. Compassion gives you a Bible. The storms are coming. The harvest is plentiful. And the Bible is a gift from God's hand because He sees you, because He loves you, because He knows what you're up against. The Bible makes us a strong congregation. Not me, not our buildings, not any other human resource you care to focus on – the Bible, God's wondrous Word. We go out into the harvest with the Word. Not with cultural philosophy, not with trending ideas on social media, not with podcast fodder – we have the Word of God. His Compassion gave it to us. The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, attends this Word.

Compassion gave us this church. Compassion gave us the Office of Holy Ministry. Compassion gave you your baptism, and Compassion feeds you His body and blood. Jesus sees you and He acts. Now! To defend you; to forgive you; to bless you; to sustain you; the Lord acts. He sees you and He sets this table to give you what all those who are harassed and helpless need – His deliverance, His righteousness, His power over sin and death. We have a shepherd, a Good Shepherd. In grief, those who have lost loved ones have gathered in this place and have heard of

the resurrection. Easter is the most glorious evidence of God's compassion. Christ is risen and His church is a cup that overflows with resurrection. We have a shepherd, a crucified and risen Shepherd. He sees us and our children. Out of compassion, He nurtures our children with His love that they may be equipped to face the coming storms and trust in Him alone. Our Sunday school is alive with Christ's compassion.

I want y'all to say it with me: We are phenomenally blessed. We are in the strong hands of the Almighty. He sees us and all those who are in need. He sends laborers into His harvest with His grace to rescue those who are harassed and helpless. Compassion is alive in this place because our Good Shepherd serves us with His death and resurrection and His wondrous strength renders us invincible.