

Sermon: Called to Compassion

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 19:2-8a; Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)**

Today's Scripture is for and about 'all the people,' but how we get to 'all the people' requires a careful reading of each passage.

With all that's going on in the world, from the stress of quarantine to the protests and riots and no sports, it can be hard to hear these words. Again, it seems as if Jesus is setting us up with an impossible task. The passage from Matthew is very dense, and it requires the same amount of effort to unpack as it does to read a report about a current event that seems to conflict with another report about the same event. It can leave our heads spinning.

The Gospel calls us to interact with the world, whether it's the world of our immediate neighborhood, the community at large, or somewhere far away. But these days, we have new boundaries to deal with: facemasks, social distancing, and a whole lot of hand hygiene. Also, it's not always a welcoming world.

Going out into a world such as we have today is daunting. It's certainly not for the squeamish. But Jesus did it, and that is what Jesus calls us to do too. But where do we start? Where should we go and what do we do when we get there?

In the Exodus story, the Israelites journeyed to and entered the wilderness of Sinai and camped there. This was about three months after they left Egypt, according to the book.

Then, through Moses, God proposed a deal: '[If] you *obey* my voice and *keep* my covenant, you *shall be* my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.'

Everybody already belonged to God, Egyptians included. But God is willing to make a deal with this group. Why? Maybe because, when they were slaves to Pharaoh, they cried out to God, who heard them and rescued them. Now they have the chance to become God's treasured possession, a holy nation, simply for keeping the covenant.

So, they made the deal. And they did it as a people answering as one. Individuals may break the covenant, and God knows they would and did, but as a people, they agreed to ‘do all that the Lord has spoken.’ They agreed to abide by God’s Word.

Fast-forward to Matthew where we see a distinct focus on the twelve disciples, a clear reference to the Twelve Tribes of Israel, which connects us to the Exodus reading.

When Jesus saw the crowds of people, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless. They were like sheep without a shepherd. Now we know from previous readings that a king or local leader was thought of as a shepherd, so we can imagine that the people in the crowds had been somehow let down by their shepherd, causing their displacement. So, it would be natural for them to seek a new shepherd, and they found Jesus.

Therefore, he summoned his twelve disciples and deputized them to act in his name. Then he sent them out with specific instructions: avoid the Gentiles and Samaritans and ‘go instead to the lost sheep of the house of Israel;’ again: twelve tribes, twelve disciples.

And it was a tough job description: no compensation in terms of pay; no health care benefits; no snacks to eat along the way; no creature comforts; and a huge downside. It’s as dangerous a mission as any of them has ever taken on before. But – the one who endures to the end will be saved. Keep your faith in God always, because why not?

And here is where Christians have run into trouble for the past two thousand years. Last week, at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel, we heard Jesus proclaim to the eleven remaining disciples, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations’ (28:19).

But, here, Jesus says to proclaim the good news only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And he says it again in chapter 15 when a Canaanite woman approached him and he ignored her, saying, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (15:24). So, which is it, all the nations or only Israel?

Naturally, there are many ways to interpret Matthew.

These twelve disciples correspond to the Twelve Tribes, so it makes sense that Jesus would restrict them to go only to the House of Israel. Also, if Jesus is the Messiah, he would only deliver Israel from persecution. Matthew is clear on this.

The House of Israel refers to all descendants of Jacob, but they don't all live in the same place. Even in the first century, they lived all over the world, *in all the nations*. Maybe that's what Jesus meant.

It could also be that today's commission was for these twelve only and the Great Commission in the last chapter was intended for all the other disciples, except, Matthew is clear that there were only eleven disciples waiting for Jesus in Galilee. Also, we know that some in the early church opposed broadening the commission to include everybody.

The bottom line is this: Israel was seen as the light of the world (5:14-16), just as the three wise men saw the light of Jesus' star. Scripture shows us that Jesus and the twelve proclaimed the good news to the Jews while Paul went to the Gentiles. Even though Matthew's Gospel seems inconsistent, it really isn't if you view the work as a whole.

So, what does it mean for the modern church? Where does this leave us today?

If we are to follow Jesus and proclaim the good news that 'the kingdom of heaven has come near,' which is part of the job description, then the church has to be in motion, as Jesus was. It can't be static. It can't stay at home; it has to go out into the world. Which, as we said earlier, is not at all easy.

The rest of the job description – curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, casting out demons – is all about restoring people to the community in any way we can. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless. That's the first thing we are called to: to have compassion for our neighbor.

Jesus went to the marginalized people and gave them peace, that inner calm we spoke about last week. We can do this too, even if it's just donating some beef stew to the food pantry or supporting a child in the Philippines so they can get through grade school. We can support a local restaurant that's been closed for three months due to the quarantine. It's all about affecting people's lives in a meaningful way.

Whatever it is you choose to do, your presence and your compassion to do the work proclaims that 'the kingdom of heaven has come near,' and it comes through you.

Amen.