

Sunday: Second Sunday after Pentecost

Date: June 14, 2020

Text: Matthew 9:35-10:8

Title: Helpless and harassed?

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

Are you tired? Are you feeling overwhelmed? Maybe you feel beaten down, whipped, tortured, and exhausted by all that has occurred this year. The year 2020 has proven to be a parade of one crisis after another. And we still have 6-1/2 months left. I cannot say it will not get any worse. This is a presidential election year.

All of the turmoil around us piles up and leads us to feel helpless as we are unable to shake a sort of fog that swirls around us. As we morph from one crisis to another, we do not have an opportunity to catch our breath and recharge our depleted batteries.

As the COVID-19 crisis began to wane, the protests and riots picked up. People rallied to the cause of Mr. Floyd with a vigor we have not seen in a few years. When protests turned to riots, when peaceful marches became destructive attacks on people and property, we see the hopelessness of the world played out on the media stage. In our homes, in our cars, on television, on radio, we are bombarded with “news” of destruction.

Good people are accused of things that never crossed their minds. I have many friends who have been accused of supporting racism because they asked a question. In our country these days there is little room for civil discourse it appears. Tolerance in our society, once the rallying cry of people who felt marginalized, has become the new club to beat differing opinions into submission. People demand that you be tolerant, but their definition of tolerance is that you agree with me completely or you are intolerant. They will not tolerate any difference of opinion or ideas.

As Jesus looks out on the crowds today, he sees people who are harassed and helpless. Not just those involved in protests, but people hunkered down avoiding the Corona Virus. The words in Matthew 9:36 convey the idea of being

“whipped/flayed/scourged”, and “thrown down.” The visual imagery of this reading makes this verse much more vivid, and frankly, appalling. People are depicted as bloodied and beaten, much like Jesus would be on Good Friday. Humiliated and tortured the masses barely exist. It is a joyless life of pain and toil. Victimized by overlords and occupying armies

This is not new. This type of behavior has gone on for many millennia. In nearly every culture throughout history we find people who are oppressed and people who are oppressors. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is going from village to village as part of his ministry. He is healing every disease and affliction and he is seeing that the people are harassed and helpless. Jesus did not name the source of their harassment, but it is not hard to imagine. Their Roman occupiers were not their friends. They were hated, and they hated the Israelites for the most part. More than just oppression by the Romans, the Jews were also beaten up and dominated by the leaders of the Jewish faith. Pharisees, Sadducees, Rabbis, and Priests all demanded strict adherence to their teachings. If you had a difference of opinion you had to be incredibly careful. Jesus found out what happens when you disagree with the religious “authorities” of his day. It got him killed.

As Jesus looked out on the people in the villages, he had compassion. He saw the problems they faced. He did not turn a blind eye to them, but recognized that they were like abused sheep. Sheep that did not have a shepherd to protect them. Sheep that were wandering. Sheep that had given up hoping for change. Sheep that were tortured by their daily existence. Sheep that were beaten, weary and hopeless.

As Jesus tends to their needs, healing their ills, casting out demons, the people see relief in the only Son of the Living God. Jesus brings to them the kingdom of heaven. As he is present with them, they are able to peer into the post resurrection life of healing and forgiveness. A life that is marked by the end of hunger, oppression, and despair.

Jesus addresses the problems faced by the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews by drawing them to him. He turned to his disciples and said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”

The harvest, people who are ripe for hearing the Gospel proclamation of Christ and him crucified. People who need tending and to know that they are loved by their Savior. People who had been merely existing, plodding along day by day through a life of struggle and pain, are the fertile soil in which the seed of the

Gospel can take root and flourish. Jesus, the sower of the seed, is scattering the seed of the Gospel into the prepared hearts of the people he had compassion for.

Jesus tells the disciples that the harvest is plentiful, as he gathers them around him. The very things that Jesus is doing, he will send the disciples out to do. Jesus calls the disciples to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt 9:38)

These laborers we see in the beginning of Chapter 10 are the disciples themselves. Jesus gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction: (Matt 10:1). The disciples were sent out to spread the healing power of Christ to the people they encounter. Having been touched by God’s grace, filled with His Spirit, given His authority, they reach out to the same oppressed and tortured sheep Jesus ministered to.

In our Gospel reading we encounter our Lord as he sees the weary people, has compassion on them, gathers his workers, and sends them out. This is a process that God demonstrated repeatedly in the Old Testament. He continues reaching his beloved human creatures in this manner in Jesus’ day. This process has not stopped. As God looks out on his people, he still sees the oppressed and tortured masses and has compassion.

As we look around today, we see a multitude of ways harassment and injustice occur around us. Some people are tossed about by injustice, grief, and abuse of authority. Others are flayed by disease, economic strain, and isolation. Everyone is harassed by a sinful inclination to respond with righteous anger (as if there is such a thing), or with fear, or self-righteousness.

Much of the problem is that many people do not see. Perhaps they cannot, having never put themselves in the position to see. Perhaps they will not, refusing to look outside their own lives and their own bubbles. Contrast that response, our response, with that of Jesus. Jesus sees. He sees the crowds in the text, and he sees the crowds today. He sees their helplessness. He sees those who are harassing them, and He does not look away. This is not surprising, for He is the Son of the One who sees all things—good, bad, and ugly.

Jesus’ response is not to recoil in horror, or to avoid the pain and suffering. Instead he has compassion. He sees the root cause of all the suffering. He came to pay the price for the sin that is present in the people he sees, and in the ones who are harming his people. The compassion shown by Jesus in our text is the

compassion God has had for all mankind since He created them. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, he had compassion on them, gave them clothes to wear and promised them that a Savior would be forthcoming.

The sin of our first parents is the barrier that keeps us from being able to stand before God. That original sin is part of our DNA as human creatures, the descendants of parents all sharing that broken and corrupt nature. Jesus however, as part of God's eternal plan of salvation, breeches that barrier. He smashed the divide between us and God by his entry into human flesh. The compassion of God for you and for me shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

God looked out on us, born sinful and broken, and had compassion on us. He saw the harassment and torture we would face in this world and he gathered his disciples, his apostles, to bring the kingdom of heaven to us. In the waters of Holy Baptism, compassion was poured over us as the water of the Sacrament washed us clean of the sin that clung to us. The taint of original sin, the stain of actual sin, washed away, and our hearts healed. By the love of God, we are drawn into His family. Jesus' entire mission on this earth was one of compassion as he brought the plan of salvation to completion.

As part of the family we enjoy the benefits of his healing. Our earthly maladies, our illness, our loneliness, our feeling of oppression, the alienation from God we struggle with, all were carried to the cross by Jesus. He still sees our feelings of failure and hopelessness. To this day, he calls his disciples to share the healing salve of the gospel with us and all the wandering sheep of this world. He continues to send people to have compassion on those who are helpless and harassed. His disciples come to suffer and to help them bear their burdens. He continues to send His people to speak words of life and forgiveness that not only create saving faith in the hearts of individuals, but also gather them together for life as His body. And he continues to send His people to continue sending others until all have heard and believed and come together in His name.

Paul spells this out for us in Romans 10:14-17,

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?  
And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?  
And how are they to hear with out someone preaching? And how  
are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How  
beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news! But they  
have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has

believed what he has heard from us?” So, faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Jesus sees our struggles. He knows of the oppression we face. He experienced the torture and harassment of this world. He faced temptation without falling into sin. He stared into the face of death without flinching. He died, and as promised He rose from the tomb. Jesus, sent to save us, obeyed the Father as he took on human flesh and gave his life for our salvation.

This Jesus saw the people in the villages of Galilee, had compassion on them, and to this day his compassion has not wavered. He has compassion on us. Jesus gathered his disciples around him and sent them out to serve their neighbors showing them Jesus’ love and healing power. And he still gathers his disciples around him today to carry his message of hope, salvation, healing, and freedom from oppression to the world. We are blessed so that we can be a blessing to our families, friends, neighbors, and others who are oppressed by sin, death, and the devil. We are empowered by Jesus to gather the sheep of this world who are still “helpless and harassed,” or “whipped and thrown down” into the family of God. May the compassion of Christ work in you and through you to give you peace and bring peace to a world overwhelmed by turmoil and crisis.

Amen.