

## **“Compassion’s Harvest”**

### **Matthew 9:35-10:1; 10:7-8**

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.

As you go, proclaim the good news,  
‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’  
Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers,  
cast out demons.

You received without payment; give without payment.

## Compassion's Harvest

Matthew 9:35-10:1; 10:7-8

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### I.

All week long, it has been my every intention to preach today on the topic of nostalgia: a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations. As you might correctly imagine, this was not for no reason as I have found myself, of late, feeling quite nostalgic about our church, this world we share, and my life in particular. Though more a resulting effect rather than an instigative cause, I'm sure, the past few weeks I have been rewatching the television series *Hill Street Blues*; a ground-breaking and acclaimed show which enjoyed near universal, critical reviews and garnered 94 Emmy Award nominations during its 7 season run beginning in 1981 and ending in 1987. The show enjoyed a well-deserved and wide-spread popularity and had a significant impact on the culture *at the time*.

### II.

Now, some 40 years later, a rewatching of *Hill Street Blues* provides an interesting and accurate commentary *of that time*; which just happened to coincide with my last two years of high school and my *five* years in college (long story). Though somewhat straightforward, slightly quaint and obviously dated, the series' stories and characters certainly hold up; even after four decades. While the fashion, hair styles and cars are evocative a certain time and place, the racial tensions, economic uncertainty and issues of gender and sexuality remain remarkably the same.

Most fascinating to me, though, is the cultural commentary and societal ethos which pervades every show. Notions of right and wrong are clearly defined. One's honor, integrity and personal accountability are what matter most. The value of civic responsibility is readily extolled. There is respect for law enforcement which, at times, stretches to the heroic.

### III.

Whereas *Hill Street Blues* presents a world where the solutions scarcely address the problems, it stands in stark contrast to our current world where most solutions are, themselves, perceived to *be* the problem. (*Think about that over the coming week.*)

Though, at the time, the series was received as a gritty and unvarnished view on the challenges of modern life which was sometimes hard to admit, rewatching it from viewpoint of the fire which is our modern world makes one yearn once more for the frying pan.

All of which got me thinking about nostalgia. How all of us, no matter our age or generation, possess a very real sentimental longing and wistful affection for some period or place in our past that evokes a sense of happiness in us which overcomes whatever personal travails or societal struggles which may have been occurring simultaneously to such a feeling of well-being.

### IV.

While this may simply be a case of seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, an example of revisionist history or a matter of selective memory, I think there is something more interesting and profound going on.

Today, Father's Day, is nostalgia's peak season as we all look back with gratitude for the role our fathers had in our lives; even if some only do so begrudgingly. As I am especially willing to concede, no father is perfect; as I certainly fell short on many occasions.

My sense, though, is that the gift of time helps us all to better appreciate the honest effort that was made, while feeling less of a need to emphasize the actual degree of accomplishment; not just as one's son or daughter, but from the perspective of a father as well.

Regardless if our experience was that of a Willie Loman who tried to do his best but could not, or that of John Walton who said very little but always seemed to say the right thing, we recognize the loving intent to be the same.

## **V.**

Having highlighted our common experience of nostalgia and recognized Father's Day as an occasion to emphasize loving intent, we turn now to today's scripture reading from Matthew chapter 9 where we find Jesus commissioning the twelve disciples to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near; and giving them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. Jesus charges his disciples to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons; and, in a final caveat, reminds them that as they, themselves, received without payment, so they are to give without payment.

Later, in chapter 26, the author of Matthew would record the resurrected Christ giving what is known as "The Great Commission": to spread the Gospel to all the nations of the world that through him they might be saved. Here, though, in chapter 9, the very human Jesus commissions his followers to, first, care for the world he has come to save.

## **VI.**

I would suggest to you that this is not simply a matter of chronology but, rather, a case of appropriate place and proper priority: it is God through Christ who does the saving after we, as the church, lay the groundwork of caring which arises from loving intent.

When I first began to study this passage and consider a direction for today's sermon, what stood out most to me was the event which precipitated the commissioning: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." As one who is a shepherd to the sheep, I can tell you that I, too, see a flock harassed and helpless. Remember, at the time of this initial commissioning, it was less about acute persecution for profession of one's faith in Jesus as the messiah, and more about the chronic condition that is life itself.

## **VII.**

Each and every day, I witness folks from this congregation being harassed by the everyday challenges inherent in being a child growing up in this world, struggling to find one's own place in it, the toil of making a living, raising a family, caring for those who are aging and tending to the needs of our neighbors even if it means not having the time or anything left in the tank to tend to our own.

I sit by the bedside of those who are helpless against the relentless march of time, receive others in my office owing to difficult circumstances which are sometimes within their control but more often beyond it, and I am humbled to witness folks brought to their knees by pain, loss, confusion or grief. One need not be the Son of God to feel over-wrought with compassion, merely the kind of open heartedness which comes from simply being a child of God. It is little wonder, then, that Jesus calls the disciples to go out into the world and help.

## **VIII.**

Unfortunately, there is no real record as to the scope and variety of the help provided by those original 12 disciples. Fortunately, we need only look to this current congregation of Christ's followers to see the sweep of compassion which spreads out across the lives of those in our church and those in our community; flowing into every nook and cranny of each other's lives. While I could certainly stand here and recite example after example of cards sent, phone calls made, rides offered, kindness shown, gifts made, forgiveness received, grace reminded, shelter given, and assistance rendered, the overall impact of the totality of these acts can be expressed quite simply: You are *not* alone in this world, we are with *you*, you are *loved*. If things are *not* all right, we will help *make* them right, or wait with you until they *are* right, or abide you *even* if they cannot be right.

## **IX.**

It is this kind of loving concern which arises from a Christ-like heart that is compassion's harvest. While we would concur with Jesus that the harvest is certainly plentiful, we laborers who are few but increasing all the time both in numbers and in empowerment must pause from our work every now and again to recognize that this time in our life, this place that is our church, and

these people who care so deeply for us, will, someday, be the cause of sentimental longing, of wistful affection, and of great nostalgia.

Summer is upon us, let us give ourselves the time and opportunity to recognize that regardless of the hardships we face and the losses we suffer, what we currently now enjoy is a gift beyond measure; for the kingdom of heaven has truly come very near, indeed.

Ok, Amen, let's roll. And, hey, hey, let's be *careful* out there.