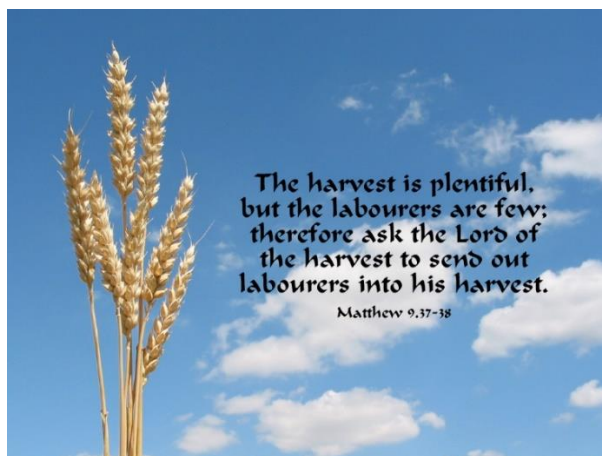


Sermon – June 18, 2023
“He had compassion for them”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 9:35-10:8

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words, that they may be a blessing for your people, a blessing that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning and Happy Father's Day to all of you fathers and blessings to all for the memories of our fathers. Welcome to the third Sunday of Pentecost. In case you are wondering, there are thirteen Sundays in the season of Pentecost. Let me remind all that we will be holding our Vacation Bible School for the Charge July 24th through 28th. Please add that event to your prayer lists and let's open our hearts to invite children in our neighborhoods to come. Don't forget to get out our Hawaiian attire for next week, and it is summer, so we will be gleaning on some of the Tuesday mornings in July. If you are interested, let me know and I will include you on the dates. The sweet corn is growing, and it is time for hands to get ready to harvest produce for those who are needy to enjoy. Dates will start showing up in the bulletin next week.

Jesus called the twelve disciples to follow him and as they have followed Jesus, they have heard him teach in synagogues and proclaim the Good News of the kingdom and seen him cure every disease and every sickness. Matthew shares with us that when Jesus saw the crowds, he

had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Word is getting out to the cities and towns of Galilee that there is something new happening in Israel. As the news travels, people begin to come to Jesus, crowds of people, large numbers, and when Jesus sees them, he has compassion for them. The Greek word translated as compassion is difficult to translate into English. Our English language does not have a word for the concept addressed by the Greek word. The Greek word is more than how we think of compassion, as caring or identifying with another's situation. When Jesus sees the crowds, he is moved in his heart. He has a deep inward response that results in action on his part for those in the crowd. We, as Jesus' disciples, are to have this same response when we look to the world and see those who are harassed and helpless. We should be those who are moved to compassion, followers of Jesus whose hearts are deeply moved, not to criticize or complain about those who are harassed and helpless, lost in sin, and deceived by the world. Instead, we are to love them and let our hearts be moved to appropriate action. The crowds that come to Jesus are oppressed by Rome. They are taxed and treated in a manner that is inconsistent with the Law that God has given them to live by. Their religious leaders have lost the idea of mercy and justice as they deal with the people. They have become those who live to point out people's failures to keep God's Law while not lifting burdens that are too heavy for the lost sheep to carry. The crowds are also helpless. They are dead in their sin and cannot escape. They are sheep without a good shepherd, those who are not being led out of their helpless state.

Those outside of a fellowship of believers, and a number who are part of churches today, are like the crowds that come to Jesus, and he has compassion for them today as he did in the first century. Those among the crowds are oppressed by the world's false narrative that the things of the world will shepherd them. Many shepherds today who are in the Church are not doing the job God called them to do and the sheep are too often without a shepherd. The problem of sin, the way of the world, still impacts the sheep. But there is a solution. Jesus has compassion not just on the lost sheep in Galilee through healing but on all of the lost sheep of the world. Jesus acted in compassion and surrendered his life, died on the cross, was resurrected, ascended to heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus was moved deep within his heart to change our situation. We have a savior. His name is Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd, and because of him, we no longer have to be those who are harassed and helpless. Jesus is the Way

and the Truth and the Life. Through Jesus, our sin burden is removed and we are no longer helpless in our sins.

Jesus had compassion for the crowds and when he was moved in his heart, he spoke 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.”ⁱ Jesus was not speaking just to the twelve, but to all of his disciples, and likewise, Jesus is not speaking to a subset of his followers today but is speaking these same words to all of those who follow him who will listen. The harvest is still plentiful. There are approximately 12,000 people in Northumberland County, and while the number of people in the churches here since Covid are lower, even with the large number of churches in the county, there are thousands of people in our county who are not following Jesus and there is a growing number who know nothing of Jesus or what it means to be his follower. The harvest is still plentiful. There are too many sheep who are helpless in their sin. Northumberland County has many sheep without a shepherd who are harassed and helpless. We do not have to look further than recent suicide events to realize that here in the Northern Neck people who are harassed and helpless are present. And just as Jesus had compassion for the crowds in the first century, today Jesus has compassion, a heart that moves in loving action, for those around us who are harassed and helpless. The words Jesus spoke to his disciples he speaks to his followers today: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Just as Jesus’ disciples responded thousands of years ago when he spoke those words, as his disciples have responded across the centuries since, we too, who have been called to follow Jesus, are to respond to the words he speaks to his disciples. We are to have compassion, loving action, for the crowds around us. Our first response to Jesus’ words is to pray this simple prayer: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”ⁱⁱ We can do that by praying, “Lord Jesus, send out laborers into your harvest.” One easy way to remind ourselves to pray this prayer is to set an alarm on our phones for 10:02, the scripture reference in Luke where Jesus’ words occur (chapter 10, verse 2). When our 10:02 alarm goes off, we stop and pray, “Lord Jesus, send out laborers into your harvest.” Notice what we are doing when we pray this prayer. We are asking Jesus to send laborers out into his harvest, and we leave open the possibility that we will be among those who will be laboring in the harvest. When Jesus shared these words with his disciples, he was the only laborer in the ripe harvest of first century Galilee.

He saw the crowds then and he still sees them today, and when he sees those who are helpless and harassed, he has compassion for them and he acts. Then, he acted to meet their needs and to give his life as an atonement for the sin of the helpless sheep. Today, Jesus seeks laborers among his followers who will do the same. When we pray this prayer, we should expect that Jesus will answer our prayer and send out workers into his harvest. In fact, we should expect that Jesus will send us out into his harvest as his laborers. Disciples of Jesus should expect that every day we will meet people we are sent to so that we might represent Jesus and act in compassion towards them and their circumstances. Followers of Jesus are to be those who live every day expecting we will be blessed to share the Good News with those in the world who are harassed and helpless. We should also expect that not everyone will accept the news we share, realizing that some will reject us and the message we share. Jesus teaches his disciples that the message they bring will be rejected by some. Just as some rejected Jesus, so also when we share, some will reject him today. Do not grow discouraged when we labor in the harvest and we bring in little. Our response is to go and labor in the harvest as Jesus sends us.

After Jesus instructed his disciples to pray, he gave them his authority. As Jesus' disciples, we also have his authority. We, like the twelve, have been given authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness in the name of Jesus. When Jesus had summoned the twelve and given them authority, he sent them out to the lost sheep of Israel. Notice that the twelve disciples' names are paired in the text. The pairing may mean that Jesus sends them in pairs. When we are sent into the harvest, we might consider looking for a second disciple to go with us. The disciples are not told by Jesus to proclaim the Good News when they arrive at their destination but are told to proclaim the Good News as they go. They are to speak to all and share the Good News with all they meet. As we are sent as laborers into Jesus' harvest, we also are to share the Good News with all we meet.

Think for a minute this morning about what was going on in Israel during Jesus' day. There were scribes teaching in every synagogue in any town where they could pull together ten Jewish men. The scribes that taught spoke about the Law and the writings of Moses. Then suddenly Jesus' disciples showed up in the towns and started speaking about something new, a kingdom of God that is not in the future but is near now. They spoke to a new kingdom that has come and is beginning to break into Israel. Can we imagine the difference between the messages of the scribes and the twelve disciples? The disciples' message was that heaven was near, mercy

had come, and his name was Jesus. The disciples would share this news and then take authority in Jesus' name over unclean spirits to cast them out and to cure every disease and every sickness. The scribe's message was how people were to follow the Law and Moses' writings and then they left those they taught to struggle with keeping the Law. They left them helpless in their sins. Jesus' disciples spoke of heaven coming near and then healed those who were harassed, giving evidence of the arrival of the kingdom in Jesus' name. If we were sitting in a synagogue on a sabbath and two men came in with such news, would we be interested? If sicknesses and diseases were cured by these men, would we pay attention to their words? If we had sick family members, would we go home and get them and take them to Jesus?

Our question for this day and time is, "Are we sent out by Jesus to the lost sheep of Israel?" As we seek to answer this question, realize we have even better Good News than what the twelve shared when Jesus sent them out this first time. Since that time, Jesus Christ has died for our sins. When we are sent out, we carry with us the ideas of forgiveness and freedom from guilt in the name of Jesus. When we proclaim Good News to the crowds, we bring Holy Spirit power for transformation of the lost sheep of Israel, transforming them from those dead in their sin to those who are alive in Christ Jesus. When we are sent by Jesus, we carry a message the world rejects, but a message that frees lost sheep from the harassment of the world. We, like the twelve disciples, need to realize the harvest is ripe, that there are thousands in our county alone, and that we are only one county among many in this nation and across the world. Entire countries and people groups still have no knowledge of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We live among those who are part of a culture descending into harassment and helplessness. Our response to being sent by Jesus is to obey him. Jesus asks us to pray, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."ⁱⁱⁱ Pray this simple prayer with the idea that Jesus will send us to someone, to some place, to one or more of the lost sheep of Israel. And if we will go, no, *when* we go, we are to continue to do what Jesus did in Galilee and throughout his time on earth. We are to do what the twelve did in the authority given to them by Jesus. What they did we as the body of Christ, the Church, are to continue to do today. We are not to attend church; we are to *be* the Church, those in the world at work in Jesus' harvest. Jesus is looking for laborers to continue his work in his harvest. In the list of compassionate acts, there is no scripture that speaks to the disciples raising the dead, but there is scripture that speaks to Jesus' disciples bringing those from being dead in

their sin to being alive in Christ. We, Jesus' disciples, the Church in this place, have the authority, we have Holy Spirit, Christ in us, can pray the prayer Jesus asks us to pray and let Jesus open our hearts to be sent out to share the Good News of Jesus with those he is sending us to today. We who have accepted Jesus as our savior have been called to follow Jesus. We have seen what Jesus does. We are asked to pray, and when we have prayed this simple prayer, we need to be ready to be sent out to lost sheep. Who is Jesus placing on our hearts this morning? Who might Jesus be asking us to have compassion for and to go to in order to share the Good News with this day, tomorrow, and the rest of our lives? The harvest is plentiful. Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord Jesus. Here am I, send me. Jesus, put your words in our mouths and give us the courage to go and share the Gospel, the Good News. Let's give the last word this morning to John Wesley who said, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." Jesus, here I am. Send me out to the lost sheep of Israel right here, right now.

Pray with me: Jesus, we see the plentiful harvest around us and around the world, and we see how few the laborers are at work in your harvest. Jesus, give us courage to be those who will pray that you will send laborers into your harvest. Jesus, here we are. Send us as laborers out into your ripe harvest right here, right now. Jesus, give us open hearts not only to respond to your call to follow you, but with hearts that are filled with compassion for lost sheep to go when and where you send us. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore we ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Lord, here we are, send us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.

ⁱ NRSV Matthew 9:37-38.

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*