

## **Sermon -- Bethel Christian Fellowship**

Sun, 07-Sep-2014 -- Missionary Sunday

**Matt. 9:35-38**

[opening prayer]

It is good to be worshipping our God with you once again. I am particularly privileged to have been asked to preach this morning when you are welcoming David and Debbie Crist. I hope to do some justice this morning to the theme of doing mission as disciples of Jesus Christ. And if I may, before I start on the body of today's message, I would like to say a personal word about my own debt to people who, like Dave and Debbie, have devoted their lives to mission work.

During the 1980s Joy and I lived in the Seattle, Washington, area. We attended the local Episcopal Church. For me, this was a cultural connection -- I was raised in the Episcopal Church and had developed a vague belief that God existed. The worship was dominated by the very beautiful liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, but no one ever asked me inconvenient and disruptive questions about whether there was any connection between the Jesus described by the Book of Common Prayer -- a connection between that Jesus and me personally.

Well, eventually in 1987 I attended a men's group weekend conference. I don't know what exactly I was expecting, but for sure I was NOT expecting to have inconvenient and disruptive questions about Jesus put to me. After all, this was the Episcopal Church. No chance that anyone would ask you to make a personal commitment.

Except that there was a man in attendance as an advisor, older than me, a teacher, a missionary of the Episcopal Church, on home on furlough from the island nation of Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific. And on the second evening, after a long day of conferences and worship and singing, he sat down with me and started asking me -- what do you yourself think of this Jesus? And he wouldn't let me get away with being vague, with waving my hands around and saying "oh yes I do think that God exists." Ah yes he said, but that isn't my question. What do YOU think of Jesus? Who is he? What is he to you?

And before I went to sleep that night, I had made the move from not thinking about Jesus very much at all to being a person who puts all his trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and King.

It changed my life, as Joy will tell you. It has changed everything for me. It changed my interests and my priorities and how I try to live and how I try to relate to other people and how I think about my destiny and how I live with the troubles which inevitably come to us all. I am not saying that I am a perfected man, but this much I know -- I am a different man, a happier man, a man with a purpose, a man with a Savior and Lord.

All this I owe to a missionary, on home on furlough, taking the time to go to a men's retreat and to sit down with one guy after a long day and to ask -- who is Jesus to you personally?

So with that background, let me turn to towards today's text. On the occasions when I have come among you to preach, I have been working through the gospel of Matthew, chapters 8 and 9. If you recall, in these chapters Matthew describes the signs and miracles by which Jesus fulfilled prophecy in showing that he was the Messiah. In particular, when last I was here, we looked at Matthew chapter 9, verses 18 to 26. In that passage we saw Jesus heal two women. The first was the daughter of the ruler of the local synagogue, who seemed to be dead; the second was a woman, suffering from severe bleeding, who was convinced that if she touched the hem of Jesus' garment she would be healed. In both cases Jesus had pity on them and they were restored to health.

After this, in the next unit, which is chapter 9 verses 27 to 34, Matthew concludes the stories about miracles and healing in chapters 8 and 9 by telling us first how Jesus gave sight to two blind men, and then how Jesus gave speech to a man who could not speak. I think Matthew was a careful and thoughtful writer -- and of course he was directed by the Holy Spirit -- so I do not think it is a "coincidence" that Matthew concludes this section by telling us that Jesus opens peoples' eyes and loosens peoples' tongues. But I hope to come back to you again some other time to preach on this unit.

Instead, today, I would like to move on to the next unit, the last unit in chapter 9, which is verses 35 to 38. I think you will see that it is particularly suitable to the topic which concerns us today, missions.

So here is Matthew, chapter 9, verses 35 to 38 (page 964 of the pew bible):

Matt. 9:35 ff: Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” [NIV 2011]

In verse 35 Matthew repeats almost verbatim a verse he had used all the way back in chapter 4, verse 23. This two verses bracket and summarize what he has to tell us about Jesus’s ministry from the end of chapter 4 up to this point at the end of chapter 9. If you think back about the contents of Matthew’s book, chapters 5 through 7 contain the Sermon on the Mount -- one of the most important sections of his teaching. And chapters 8 and 9 contain accounts showing by his miracles and healing that the Messiah is here. Both his teaching and his miracles show that kingdom of God is indeed at hand, it is present, it is near. So verse 35 is a fitting summary to what Matthew has been telling us in these chapters.

In verses 36 to 38 Matthew makes a transition which leads to Jesus’s discourse in chapter 10. In chapter 10 Jesus appoints 12 disciples, instructing them to cast out evil spirits and heal every kind of disease and illness, and telling them to go to the people of Israel, God’s lost sheep, and announce to them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near (10:6-7, NLT). The remainder of chapter 10 contains his instructions to these disciples. Some of these instructions seem to be specific instructions about this specific mission trip to the people of Israel. But later in the chapter Jesus appears to be describing the conditions under which people involved in spreading the Good News of the Kingdom will operate through the remainder of the existence of his church on the earth.

It is not hard to see that the key to understanding these verses, verses 36 to 38, and indeed the background to all of the evangelism of the church since then, is in the phrase “he had compassion on them.” Now “compassion” is a word which we perhaps do not use every day. Compassion might be defined as “sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.” Thus, when Jesus looked out on the crowds around him, what he saw stirred his pity and concern for the suffering and misery of the people in the crowds.

When we say that Jesus was filled with pity, with compassion, we are pointing to one of the most important things we can say about him. In love he came down from heaven and assumed a human body. He did these because he loved us even though we were yet sinners.

The result is that even while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (Rom. 5:10).

But the compassion of God is not just a New Testament theme -- it is everywhere in the Old Testament as well. Recently my Bible reading plan had me in Lamentations chapter 3. Now Lamentations has not been a book to which I have turned frequently. It is mostly cry of pain from the prophet upon the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, a wailing and lament concerning the destruction and death not only of countless individuals but also of the hope of Israel.

And yet smack in the middle of this wail, this lament, we hear words with which most of us are familiar, even if we are not quite sure we know where they come from. This is what the prophet proclaims:

22 The faithful love of the LORD never ends!<sup>b</sup>

His mercies never cease.

23 Great is his faithfulness;

his mercies begin afresh each morning.

24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my inheritance;

therefore, I will hope in him!"

31 For no one is abandoned

by the Lord forever.

32 Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion

because of the greatness of his unfailing love.

[Lamentations 3:22-24, 31-32 -- New Living Translation]

Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion and pity. Where does God's compassion and pity come from? It comes from the greatness -- a greatness which almost defies description, although the prophet struggles to express it -- the greatness of his unfailing covenant love. We can count on this mercy and this love -- it is forever, we are never abandoned.

This same love is visibly demonstrated in Jesus, the Son, in his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. He is the Messiah in whom the divine mercy is present. This is why when he saw the crowds, in our passage today, he was deeply moved with pity for them.

Matthew tells us that Jesus had pity on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. They were troubled, confused, bewildered, miserable, vulnerable. They were lost and adrift, and did not even know that there was anything wrong.

I want to reflect for a moment on the fact that they are no different from where you and I once were. The only reason you and I can trust in the covenant mercy of God is because someone has come to us and given us the call of Jesus, a call which we have heard and obeyed. And I emphasize this because I find myself sometimes feeling superior to those stupid sheep who don't follow Jesus the Messiah.

Have you ever felt the same way? Have you ever said something nasty about Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or secular atheists? Are you praying for Richard Dawkins? Because all these people are sheep without the true shepherd. These are the people on whom we are to have compassion, just as Jesus has compassion on them. When in my smug superiority I say, "you, Richard Dawkins, are a stupid buffoon," I am completely failing to see that he, too, is trouble and confused and bewildered and miserable, and that he too is part of the mission field.

Jesus then switches the metaphor from sheep without a shepherd to that of a harvest -- not just a humdrum, everyday harvest, but rather a great harvest, a plentiful harvest. Did you know that the population of the world grows by about 10,000 people every hour of every day? I didn't either, until I looked it up while writing this sermon. During the length of our worship and fellowship this morning, over 20,000 souls have begun their life journey. Surely there is an abundant harvest!

What does Jesus first tell his disciples to do? He says: ASK the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field. First, we are to pray! I know, because Joy and I have been in attendance here at Bethel off and on for years, that it is your practice to pray in every worship service and every prayer meeting for your missionaries and for the global work of Christ's church. But I wonder how many of us make it our practice to do this in our private, daily prayers? I know that this is a good question, because when I ask it, I am accusing myself of

failure to pray in this way. But this is the first things Jesus says: we must ASK, we must PRAY, that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers.

Who is this Lord of the harvest? Well, in one sense of course it is God. God is sovereign in this, as in everything. Somehow he called David and Debbie to serve him. I don't know their personal story -- but this I know: behind their story is God's plan, God's intention that his harvest field will be harvested. God *sent* them.

But there is a more specific answer to the question, who is the Lord of the harvest? This answer comes in the first verse of chapter 10 -- that is, in the next verse beyond this morning's text. In verse 1 Matthew tells us that "Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority ... ."

So who is it that is sending out the workers? It is Jesus himself who is sending out the workers! When David and Debbie go out -- Jesus is sending them. When my brother-in-law goes on mission trips to Haiti and to fight malaria in Africa -- Jesus is sending him. When that Episcopal missionary sat down with me in 1987 and asked me about my relationship with Jesus -- Jesus was sending him.

So in your prayers for missionaries and mission fields, remember this: it is Jesus himself who himself is calling people to go to those bewildered sheep.

And I think this has the following implication. There are all kinds of people who want to hear the gospel, who need to hear the gospel, who will, we are promised, respond to the gospel. The good news, the gospel, is not a futile, hopeless exercise. No, the point is that there is a harvest field, and a plentiful harvest. God has promised that there will be a great harvest. Doing missions always bear fruit, even if we do not see it immediately.

But the harvesting itself, how do we do this? Well, listen to what Jesus tells the twelve disciples he commissions in chapter 10. This is what he says to them in verses 7 and 8:

Go and announce to them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons. Give as freely as you have received! [NLT]

Did you notice that there are two parts to these instructions? They are to announce that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Jesus is at hand! He is available to you, right now! That is the

first part. And the second part is to heal the sick, raise the dead, cure, cast out demons, give freely! In other words, he is instructing us both to announce the good news about Jesus *and* to do good to the sheep, to love them, to seek their welfare, to seek their well being. He had made this latter point earlier in Matthew 5, in the sermon on the mount:

14 "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. [NIV]

This is a real challenge to me. Do non-believers look at me and say -- what is different about him? Do I seem to be a light which shines before others?

I don't want to lay a legalistic burden on you or on myself, but I do think that we should be aware of this: -- how we behave towards the people we are hoping will come to love Jesus is critical to their perception of Jesus. Are we pleasant, or shrill? Do we ask questions and *listen* to them? Or do we just wait for them to shut up so we can jam our message down their throat?

Can a stranger even hear our message?

One thing seems very clear: there is always going to be a communications gap between the Christian and the non-Christian. And the only way to get across that gap is to get close to that person, to begin to understand what his or her concerns and needs and fears are, to gain his or her trust (which I hardly need to say can only be done as you learn to trust him or her in return).

What does this sound like to you? What I am trying to describe is learning to love your neighbor -- to listen, to ask real questions, to hear what they say, to engage in real discussion, rather than ranting and pounding the table. For if we have compassion on the lost sheep without a shepherd, then we are demonstrating love towards them, then we are being in relationship with them.

And why do we do this? We do this because we ourselves have heard the Good News about how Jesus is near to us. Someone has come to us, and been a light on a hill, and been the

means which God has used to open our eyes to see Jesus breaking into this world and making it his own kingdom.

Let me conclude with this final thought. One morning when I was first thinking about this morning's sermon, I sat down with my wife Joy for our first cup of coffee of the day. When we had both drunk some coffee, I asked her, what is the key thing that all of us need to hear about missions?

This is what she said:

The key point about missions is that missions is not just what other people do -- people like David and Debbie. Missions is of course about that, but it is more. It also is about what *we* do where *we* are planted. It doesn't necessarily require a passport. It is something no Christian can opt out of.

So this is my prayer for us all this morning, as we celebrate having the Crist's with us. May we all pray for them and all who like them have left home and possessions and family and comfort in order to be witnesses to Christ. We need to pray that they will be nurtured, and we need to make sure that we continue ourselves to nurture them.

But I pray that we also will strive, ourselves, to be loving and bold and attractive and attentive missionaries, no matter where we are placed. For indeed the harvest is plentiful -- and we ourselves, all of us, each one of us, right here, right now-- are the workers sent into the harvest field.

Amen, and may God add a blessing to his word.

[Peter Flowers]