

## ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

*Proper 6*

Matthew 9:35—10:8 [9-23]

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Two major themes or messages jump out at us from today's Gospel. The first is the *overflowing love* and *graciousness* of God in Christ Jesus. St. Matthew tells us that Jesus was traveling about the country, "*teaching in [the] synagogues,...proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. (9:35)*" And further, Matthew says that "*When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them... (9:36a)*"

We know that word, "compassion." It's used a lot these days. But throughout the New Testament, that Greek word translated into English as "compassion," is almost always used *only* of God, and his son Jesus. Indeed, there is only one time when the quality of compassion is attributed to a human being, and that is in the parable of the good Samaritan.

If we were to translate "compassion" a bit more literally, we might say that it means "to feel in the viscera" or "to feel in your guts, or in your heart." Here the Lord Jesus looks upon the people of Israel and he *feels* for them, he *hurts* for them. Matthew tells us Jesus has such compassion for them because they were "*harassed and helpless;*" because they were troubled and downtrodden.

And why were they in such a state? Because they were "*like sheep without a shepherd.*" They were not just needy in general — depressed, sick or discouraged — but they were needy because they did not have a good shepherd — someone to lead them.

And so Jesus then *gives himself* to them as the good shepherd. He proclaims good news to them. He brings healing and new life. In short, he ushers in a foretaste of the kingdom of God.

And because he has such compassion, because he sees such a great need among the people, Jesus then also summons his twelve disciples and sends them out, to continue his ministry of grace and mercy. He gathers his followers, and he grants them the very same authority which God had bestowed upon him. He charges his disciples to continue his work. He sends them to preach the Gospel, to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom and to be agents of healing and new life. And there's one phrase in Christ's sending of the disciples which is particularly telling. Jesus bids them: "*You received without payment; give without payment.*"

Jesus had afterall, simply *chosen* his disciples. He had *elected them*. It wasn't that they were such outstanding individuals. Some — like Matthew — were publicly regarded as great sinners. But Jesus — in his mercy — *chose them* to be his own. He showered his love upon them, and he called them out to be his

followers. So, the disciples truly had received *without payment*. They had been the recipients of God's love, *freely* given.

And now, Jesus calls on his disciples to be *the agents* of God's gracious love. Now they are to pass on that *unearned* grace and mercy. Now they are to freely proclaim the Gospel. Now they are to announce — and indeed *to give* — salvation to all who will listen. Now the disciples are to be the means by which Christ will continue to grant his love and redemption.

That is the first major message which this text announces to us: the proclamation of God's abundant love in Christ — *freely given* to undeserving, sinful people. It is as St. Paul reminds us in our Second Reading: "*Christ died for the ungodly. . . While we still were sinners, Christ died for us.*" God sees our need, and he doesn't wait for us to ask for help or seek him out. In Jesus, *he seeks us out*.

But there is another major theme in today's Gospel, and it is a theme which is rather disturbing, and downright troublesome. For the second point which Matthew makes is that the Gospel and the ministry of the disciples, will face a goodly amount of *rejection* and *hostility*. The disciples are to be proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom, and one would expect that people in need would be eager to receive and embrace that good news. After all, if you're sick, you like it if someone brings you healing. And if you're dying, you like it if someone brings you life. Jesus warns his disciples that this will *not* always be so.

Christ speaks to his followers about what to do when people do not welcome them or listen to their words. He cautions them that he is "*sending [them] out like sheep into the midst of wolves (10:16).*" He prepares them for the eventuality that families will be split apart over this proclamation of the Gospel, and that the disciples will face animosity and persecution because of their witness to him. In short, Jesus makes it clear that many people will *reject* the Gospel.

Now, the Gospel is literally, *good news*. So again, it seems rather strange that not everyone would immediately welcome it. But when we dig just a bit, we can see *why* the Gospel is not always embraced, and indeed *why* the Gospel is not always *received* as good news.

This reason for rejection is perhaps most readily evident in Christ's assessment that the people were "*harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that *he* is to be their shepherd (25:31-32). And we tend to take that picture of a shepherd, as a rather soft and gentle way of imaging Christ's tender care for his people. But in truth, the shepherd was not just a soft and docile figure. In the ancient Near East, "shepherd" was often used as a metaphor for the *absolute authority* of a king. A shepherd was one who was *in charge* — one who had *authority*. A shepherd would be a *ruler* or a *master* — a shepherd was one who commanded obedience.

And *that* reveals to us the truth of why the Gospel so often faces such resistance or outright rejection. Jesus came with good news, to be sure. But he also came as a *shepherd*. That is, he came as a *ruler*, a *master*, a *king*. And the old sinner in us, simply *does not want* a shepherd. The old Adam, the old Eve, does not want to be *ruled* or *mastered*. The sinner does not want to be *led*. The sinner does not want to *obey* a king or lord.

For finally, that is the heart of sin — the desire to be *one's own king* — to be *one's own shepherd*. To be lord of one's own life, and so to give obedience and homage to no one, but the *self*.

So, it isn't so surprising afterall, that the Gospel faces a good deal of opposition and rejection. Jesus comes with good news. He comes declaring the kingdom. He forgives sins. He brings healing. But he also comes as the *shepherd*. He comes as the great *lord* and *master*. And the sinner — in others and in us — wants to have none of that. Indeed, the sinner would say, "I may be harassed and helpless, I may be troubled and desperate, but you're not the boss of me! *I'm in charge of me!* No one else is my master!"

And so we may be tempted to try and "water down" the Gospel. We don't like to have our old ways threatened by Christ's radical claim on us. And neither do we like to face rejection from others, on account of our witness to Jesus. So we may try to soften the edges of the Gospel, to tone it down and to tame it. But if we do that, if we change the Gospel to suit *our* needs, or to suit the desires of those to whom we bear witness, then it isn't finally the Gospel that we proclaim, but rather something of our own imagination or construct.

So, for those of us who are part of the Church, we must ever remember both of these truths from today's text. We must remember that the Gospel is the good news of God's *freely-given*, overflowing love for us in Jesus. But we must also remember that this good news is a *threatening* word to the sinner in us, and that the old sinner will always try and resist this word, or water it down.

We must remember both truths, because only when our proclamation is clear that Jesus is gracious, *and* that he is Lord and Master, only then will we be finally set free from our bondage to sin. Only then are we set free to follow him and love him, and to boldly proclaim him to the world.

May it ever be so.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen