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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, October 11, 2023
Matthew 9:35-38, RSV
A Man of Compassion

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 9:35-38, RSV
In last week's reading, Jesus healed a man who was unable to speak. Now we read a great thing about Jesus: He is a man of compassion.

³⁵And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

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

When it comes my time to die and to set sail for heaven, I think it will be good if I can remember this short reading and think to myself, "Jesus is a man of compassion. I am glad for that!"

There are two sides to this great reading. On the one side, we have Jesus. He is *the* Man of Compassion. On the other hand, we have the crowds. They are harassed and helpless. I think they could use some compassion. Let's take a look at both sides of this story.

I hope I am not being impious, but think of all the possible ways the only begotten Son of God *could have* come to our earth. He could have come as a football player no one could tackle. He could have come as a Jeopardy contestant who answered every question right. He could have come as an investor who always chose winning stocks. All manner of glorious ways of life were available to him, but what did he actually choose? He chose to be a poor man with nowhere to lay his head. He chose to give his life for the sake of the world. Thirty-three years old. It is hard to die at that age. You are young and strong and naturally you have hopes and dreams for the future. But Jesus came as a servant, not as a master. He came as one willing to lay down his life as a ransom for many. And he came as a man of compassion. He went about the towns and villages of ancient Israel. He went around doing good. This evening's text is a precious one because it speaks of our Lord's character:

³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36, RSV)

Note that Jesus is looking upon “the crowds.” Crowds are mixed kinds of things. In any crowd, there are probably both saints and sinners, good folk and rascals. But Jesus gazes out upon the crowds and has compassion for them. When we stop to think that Jesus has conquered death, and that we are in his hands, I doubt that we could come up with better words about Jesus: He is a man of compassion.

So, that is one half of the story. We have been speaking of Jesus, who is such a good man. Now, let’s turn to the crowds. Our text says that Jesus looks at the crowds and they seem “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Do you think that is so? Do you think that Jesus is seeing things accurately? I think he is seeing things right.

Again, we are speaking of “the crowds.” A crowd is a mixed kind of thing. In any crowd, there are probably folks who are doing well and those who are struggling. There are people other people admire, perhaps even envy, because everything seems to go well for them. And then, there are people who plainly have a rough go of it. They might be poor or even homeless. They might be lame or lepers or blind or deaf. Well, Jesus looks at them all and pities them.

And in this, again Jesus sees accurately. None of us is yet in heaven. Each of us lives in this fallen world where we are threatened by sin, death, and the devil. Each of us suffers some blows in life. And then there are indeed people who are harassed and helpless. There are people whose tough lives command our compassion, along with the compassion of Jesus.

For many of us, there is little we can do about the suffering in this world. We can *try* to relieve misery in this world, and certainly we should, yet in a way, we too are harassed and helpless in face of so much suffering. There are limits to our resources and our strength. But the great thing about Jesus is that he is able to look upon the harassed and helpless crowds, roll up his sleeves, and resolve to do something about it — something about this whole world’s sum of suffering. It will cost him. You know that. That is why our hearts are so moved on Good Friday. But in Jesus, we find a compassion that does not remain a mere emotion that but a plan of life, a plan of rescue, and plan of salvation!

To this Man of Compassion be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.