

“Divine Compassion”

Matthew 9:35-38

Is it possible that pastors might sometimes be the *object* of compassion rather than a *channel* of compassion?

A certain pastor describes his own experience. “There I was, standing in a room full of treadmills, stationary bikes with huge fans and people with wires attached to their chests monitored by a group of nurses. I had a fresh scar running down my own chest that was still tender. The nurse who attached the sticky patches to my chest asked what I did for a living.

“I replied, ‘I’m a minister.’

“She smiled and said, ‘We get more ministers in here than any other profession.’”

The nurse then introduced the pastor with the scar down his chest to the other ministers in the room. He himself was in the cardiac rehab room because of a congenital heart defect, which had just been discovered. His colleagues, however, had cardiovascular disease that led to heart attacks.

So, are clergy frequent visitors to cardiac units? Usually, we think of ministers visiting patients, not of ministers *as the patients!*

The answer, according to a research article published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is, “Yes!” The CDC rated clergy as the white-collar profession with the highest rate of ischemic heart disease.

Makes one wonder: How can pastors take better care of themselves?

Just think about those beloved potluck dinners, and see the mounds of fried chicken, high carbohydrate side dishes and all the tasty desserts: Alice Linn's strawberry delight, Barb Badowski's kitchen creations, Delila Rodger's melt in your mouth bakery.

How many ministers, when they make a home visit, are offered cookies or pie and feel guilty about turning down such hospitality? I wasn't one of them! Now I am.

Our text today tells us that Jesus had compassion.

Pastors, too, have compassion.

And pastors, more often than we know, need your compassion. I have needed your compassion and prayers and have felt them all the way! Now I prepare to have my gallbladder out on Wednesday.

Let's look more closely at this text about the compassion of Jesus.

Verse 36 of today's text reads: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

So, Jesus had compassion. But what is it?

Definitions for compassion include feeling sorrow for someone, being sympathetic and being concerned for the welfare of others.

Compassion has also been described as *entering into the suffering of others*.

However, in the Bible, the Greek word translates into English as “he had compassion” and is often linked directly to Jesus, either in describing why he does something or used in a parable.

Through these images, then, we begin to catch a glimpse of what divine compassion looks like in the various occurrences found in the New Testament.

In verse 36, Jesus is moved to compassion when he looks out at the crowds that have gathered. They have heard about the healings, how he cured every disease and every sickness as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom.

But as Jesus gazes out upon the masses, he sees a people who have been harassed, and he realizes just how helpless they are without someone to guide them. He sees how vulnerable they are to bad teachings and the figurative wolves that would prey upon sheep without a shepherd. Here we see this divine compassion connected to those in poor health, gathering because they have seen and heard of the miracles Jesus is performing.

But Jesus realizes there are too few laborers to tend to their needs.

When we compare this instance of compassion to others in the gospels, we discover a similar pattern. In 14:14, the crowds again gather, and Jesus has compassion on them, and that compassion is displayed through his healing of the sick among the crowds before he feeds the thousands gathered.

Again in 20:34, Jesus encounters two blind men and is moved to compassion. This compassion is demonstrated through sight being restored to the blind.

Even when Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan as it is found in the gospel of Luke, Jesus describes the Samaritan as a person moved to compassion who tends to the man's wounds, bandaging them and carrying him to a place to heal.

In each of these scenarios, compassion is directly linked to addressing the health and wellness of the people. Whether we see compassion in the healing of their sicknesses or the feeding of the thousands who are hungry, *divine compassion is demonstrated with consideration to the health of others.*

Jesus says. "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (v. 8). The disciples are *compassionately removing various forms of oppression.*

As the disciples followed Jesus, they witnessed these examples of compassion and miraculous acts performed by Jesus. And throughout the centuries, miraculous things occurred when faithful Christians and others devoted themselves to studying causes and cures of various diseases. Advances in medicine have allowed societies to do the unbelievable in curing health conditions that were once considered incurable, even virtually eradicating many forms of illness, as we will eventually eradicate the Coronavirus.

Science and increased medical knowledge have helped us to better understand much of what Jesus was dealing with and what he sent the disciples out to heal. Often, what was described as demon possession was much more likely to be epilepsy or various forms of mental illness. Many people would have received little compassion for various forms of illness that we now know are easily treatable.

When Jesus looked out upon the masses and had compassion, he sent out his disciples with a healthy mission that would begin to shape the history of medicine, wellness and the pursuit of health for centuries to come.

Stories abound throughout history of those who have fully embraced this divine mission that Jesus gave to the Twelve he sent out to show compassion.

Around A.D. 369, Basil of Caesarea inherited a ton of money. He decided that the best use of this windfall was to glorify God by creating a place where the sick and the dying could receive care. He built what many call the predecessor to the modern hospital. Basilias, as it was called, turned into something that looked more like a small city than a building dedicated to curing illness. The complex included facilities that could be compared to modern hospice houses, soup kitchens or infirmaries.

When Charlemagne became emperor of what would be called the Holy Roman Empire, he also made a compelling decree that all cathedrals and monasteries have an infirmary attached to the building. These small hospitals were dedicated to caring for the poor and sick. All of these acts contributed to modern hospitals, many of which continue to be religiously affiliated. Thank God for our hospitals and all our hospital worker-servants over these past 9 months. All health care workers please stand.

This is the divine compassion that we find through Jesus Christ: That when there is a need, Jesus shows compassion. Not only does Jesus have compassion on us, but he tells us how to show that same compassion to others. Compassion is linked to action — action that is liberating and healing.

It is with this same divine compassion that Jesus Christ sends us out on a mission to serve those in need.

May the peace of God . . .

#722 – O Christ, Your Heart, Compassionate