

Sermon: The Compassion of Christ

Title: The Compassion of Christ

Text: Matthew 9:35-10:8

Liturgical Date: Pentecost 3, Proper 6 A

Calendar Date: June 24, 2026

Location: St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Door County, 316 W. Main St., Forestville, WI 54213. 920-856-6420.

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Christopher D. Jackson

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. You may be seated.

Today we heard from our gospel lesson these words: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.” Compassion—not self-righteousness, although he was indeed righteous. Not disgust, even though certainly on account of what he witnessed he could have felt that, but rather compassion.

And that’s what we’re going to be talking about today: the compassion of the Lord Jesus Christ. When we read this passage, I think our initial reaction is that Jesus has compassion upon them because these are sympathetic individuals, right? Some of the imagery that’s used there leads us to think, “Oh, they’re like these fluffy, cute, white sheep that maybe wandered away, but still they’re sympathetic.”

But actually, I think the imagery that St. Matthew is using here—and some of the other ways these crowds are described—paints a very different scenario than what is in our mind’s eye. We’re going to dig into that a little bit.

A Personal Contrast: Disgust vs. Compassion

But by way of digging into it, I want to contrast the reaction of Jesus—this reaction of compassion—with a reaction that I had a few years ago when I witnessed various crowds.

A few years ago, Mary and I were celebrating our twentieth wedding anniversary. I took the weekend off from church here. We still went to church down in Chicago where we were visiting, but we took the weekend off here. On Saturday, as we were walking around downtown Chicago, let’s just say we weren’t in Forestville anymore.

They had a big music festival going on downtown. If you’re not familiar with these, this is kind of the big thing with young people these days—massive music festivals with twenty thousand, thirty thousand, forty, fifty, sixty thousand people. I think there was a forty-thousand-person music festival downtown that day.

And that sounds wholesome, right? Young people going to listen to music. In a way, I guess that part of it is. But certainly a lot of the activity around it wasn't, including a lot of the attire that people—especially young women—were wearing as they walked around downtown Chicago.

And that wasn't even the worst of the attire that we witnessed that day. There was also a very niche lifestyle convention going on downtown. I won't go any further than that, but let's just say we went back and took refuge in our hotel room. I muttered to myself, "My goodness, the world is going to hell in a handbasket."

I was filled with disgust at what I witnessed. I think a lot of us feel the same when we're scrolling social media or watching TV—we might be filled with disgust at the things we see, or maybe self-righteousness. But when Jesus was witnessing these crowds, he was seeing something akin to that—probably even worse. Because Jesus, as the Son of God, can see the heart of man. Imagine all the iniquity he witnessed as he looked out on those crowds. Matthew describes them as crowds that were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

The True Meaning of "Sheep Without a Shepherd"

Once again, to us that sounds somewhat sympathetic—these cute, fuzzy, woolly sheep being chased around, harassed, helpless. But when you really think about it, "sheep without a shepherd" is one of the strongest images Scripture gives for willful, active rebellion against God—going our own ways.

Isaiah chapter 53, one of the most poignant prophecies of the passion of Jesus Christ, uses the image of sheep: "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." Now I think you can probably fill in the blank here: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

And so on it goes. The strongest image—one of the strongest images—that the Scriptures have given us of active, willful disobedience against the Lord and rebellion against his righteous rule is the visual of a sheep that has gone astray. And that is why these individuals were like sheep without a shepherd.

It's not that God had simply ignored them. No, the Lord God had gathered up this people out of Egypt and rescued them from the mouth of those who were trying to devour them. This flock the Lord had led out into the wilderness and shepherded them there. And then,

as a good shepherd, he led them through that valley of the shadow of death into the green pastures and beside the still waters of this good and pleasant land of Canaan.

In reaction to this shepherding goodness and faithfulness of the Lord, the people had pledged in the time of Moses, “We will obey. We will do what you have commanded.” And that’s reasonable, because the commands of the Lord are light. His yoke is easy. His burdens are joyful to take upon us. His commands are good, and they were given to them for their wellbeing. They are given to us for our wellbeing as well.

The Goodness of God’s Commands and Their Consequences

In fact, the Lord promised, “If you do these commands that I set forth before you here at Sinai, you will do well. Things will go well for you.” And it makes sense. For example, according to the Fourth Commandment, if we honor father and mother—and therefore all the various authorities the Lord has put into our lives—things will tend to go well for us. God promises it, right? That’s the first commandment with a promise. The other commandments have promises as well.

What if, according to the Eighth Commandment, instead of exposing our neighbor or speaking ill of our neighbor, we are discreet with the trusts our neighbor gives us and we uplift our neighbor in word and reputation? Others will trust us. Things will tend to go well for us.

What if, according to the Sixth Commandment, we honor our marriages and the marriages of others? Once again, things will tend to go better for us and for our neighbor.

What if, according to the Seventh Commandment, instead of taking what doesn’t belong to us, we protect the possessions of those around us—not only protect their possessions but help them to improve them, and also help our neighbor to improve his means of acquiring income? Once again, things will tend to go better for us. We’ll have no lack of business and cooperation from our neighbors in our lives.

But those people had chosen to go their own way. And because of this, they were suffering the consequences in their lives on account of sin—both the sin that they had inherited from Adam and their own sin which they had committed.

Healing Every Disease and Every Infirmary

Now here we’re going to be extending and probably challenging a way that we typically see things. We’re working backwards here. So we started at verse 36. We’re going to go back to verse 35: “Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.”

Certainly some of these various diseases and infirmities... (There's a reason I'm calling them infirmities versus afflictions. We'll get to that in a second.) Some of these individuals would have suffered on account of the fall of humanity in general. We heard in the epistle of Paul to the Romans that through the sin of the one man, Adam, death has come into the world. And so therefore all the consequences of sin have come into this world through Adam—all the sickness, all the disease, all the pain, all the various kinds of oppression in the world, whether political or moral or physical—all of this on account of the sin of Adam.

Sometimes we suffer those things not on account of any sin of our own. For example, when it was asked of Jesus about the man born blind, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus said neither, but rather this has happened to him so that the glory of God could be displayed in him. Sometimes we suffer not through any active sin of our own, but rather on account of the fall of humanity and the fall of the world.

There are other kinds of afflictions and other kinds of consequences of sin that we absolutely do suffer on account of our moral ills. Boy, people don't like to hear this these days. People want to cordon off the consequence of sin from the sin in our minds, and I think that the translators of the English Standard Version fell prey to this mindset, by the way. Now, don't get me wrong—I like the ESV and generally I just believe that I'm dumb, and so I'm going to follow the translation that's given to me because the people translating are way smarter than me. But here's one circumstance where I think being dumb helped.

When I was looking at this particular passage, I noticed that the word they translated as "affliction" was a really curious word. Maybe "affliction" wasn't the right translation there. The Greek word is *malakia*. You don't have to know that, but here's the interesting thing about *malakia*. *Malakia* is not a problem outside of me that comes and afflicts me. A *malakia* is a problem with me. It's a problem I have. The most literal translation of *malakia* is "softness."

So therefore, sometimes that gets translated as "infirmity." That's a better translation, right? Because that's a problem with me, not a problem outside of me that hurts me, but rather it's my problem. And this word *malakia* can be used for all kinds of softness. For example, if I break my bone, now my bones aren't hard anymore. That's a *malakia*, right? If I am swelling, now I've got the softness of the swelling. That's a *malakia*. But it's also used for moral infirmities of all kinds. In fact, St. Paul uses it in Corinthians to talk about the moral infirmity of homosexuality (using a euphemism).

So if I give myself over to gluttony, that moral softness of gluttony—I might become physically soft, right? I might have all kinds of health issues. My blood pressure might go up. My cholesterol might go up. My blood sugar might go up. All kinds of health problems

because of my moral inability to exercise self-control. And this goes with all kinds of ways in our life. Because of our inability to follow God's law, we have all kinds of infirmities and difficulties around us.

So let's talk about the negative examples. We talked about what if I keep the Eighth Commandment—people will tend to trust me better. But what if, on the other hand, I speak ill of those around me and I gossip and I slander? I'll lose the trust of those around me. What if I take what doesn't belong to me and I seek to undermine the careers of others around me? I will not be considered a good coworker. People won't want to cooperate with me. People won't want to do business with me. They're going to try to stay away from me. And I will suffer that consequence. And yes, that will hurt. But that's the due consequence for my sin.

Here's what I'm getting at: When Jesus was looking out on these crowds, he was looking out at people who were actively rebelling against God. Straight from the fall. And because of rebellion against God, they were facing all kinds of consequences on account of this—both on account of the rebellion of Adam and their own rebellion as well.

The Compassion That Leads to Healing

If I were in that position—sinner that I am—looking out at the sins and the consequences of people for their sin, I would have reacted with self-righteousness or disgust. But Jesus, being God and a God of love—as we sing, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son the world to save”—Jesus instead reacts with compassion. Not to excuse sin or to gloss over it, but rather that he himself would suffer the consequence for sin, for our sins.

As we read from Isaiah 53: “He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” Healed of our disease and healed of our afflictions. We are healed in the transformation of our hearts. Because the Lord Jesus Christ, in his great love for us and having suffered for us, has thenceforth sent his Holy Spirit by means of that gospel message to transform our hearts.

So now our hearts are no longer in rebellion against the Lord, but rather are shaped and formed into hearts that trust in him and have hope in him. And in this hope we are healed. We have the healing of our hearts, and on account of this healing of our hearts, we have the great hope of total and complete healing when Christ returns in power and might and glory. On that day, this old sinful flesh will melt away in the purifying glory of God that we will behold. Our rebellion against God will be no more, and therefore we will no longer suffer the consequences of our rebellion on that great and glorious day of Christ's return.

Christ Jesus sees all things. And he looked out not only upon these crowds, but he has looked upon us sinners that we are—those who have gone astray like sheep—and he has had compassion upon us. Praise be to God for this.

Leaving with Resolve and Gratitude

As you leave today, I want you to leave with two emotions.

First of all, resolve that you would be more Christ-like in showing compassion for the sinner. That when you behold sin, you would not be exalted in self-righteousness, but rather that you would be moved to compassion as Christ our Lord was filled with compassion. Not to excuse sin, not to overlook it, but rather that through this resolve you would, for example, pray for the soul of the sinner. That you would work for the sake of the soul of the sinner. Always being ready to give an account of the hope that you have in Christ Jesus. That you would support the work of St. Peter's as here we proclaim this gospel message, this message of forgiveness in the blood of Christ, so that your fellow sinners here would have their hearts lifted up in faith towards God.

And so that we might continue with this clarion call to the community so that others would hear and know of their Savior, the Lord Christ Jesus. Pray for the work of missionaries around the world, and support missionaries as they proclaim this gospel message to all who will hear so that hearts may be gathered into the Lord's flock.

Yes, I want you to leave here with resolve, but also I want you to leave here with gratitude. Lord Jesus, thank you that even though I, like an errant, straying sheep, have gone astray, instead you have shown compassion to me. Lord Jesus, thank you that you have suffered the consequences of my sin so that in eternity I might enjoy the consequences of your righteousness. Lord Jesus, thank you. All praise and honor and glory be to the Lord Jesus Christ, he who is full of compassion. Amen.

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