

## Barre Congregational Church

June 14, 2020: A Pastoral message by Pastor Margaret Keyser  
~ Second Sunday After Pentecost~

*“When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them ...”*

---

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 9 verse 35 -38 and 10 verse 8 - 23**

### **I. Introduction:**

We all have experiences of being in crowds, right? In the malls, on the beaches, sports events, and many other situations. We also know what it feels like to have compassion when it comes to our children and family and loved ones. We know what it means to care for those close to us, and those who are in need.

### **II. Compassion in the message and ministry of Jesus**

The concept of Jesus’ compassion can best be understood in the commandment, “Love God and neighbor as yourself”. His life is all about love for God and neighbor. His message about compassion can be seen in some of the parables He told His disciples and those who challenged Him, such as the lawyer in the story of the Good Samaritan, who was instructed to go and be the good neighbor to the one who is wounded like the wounded man on the road to Jericho. But more, Jesus’ compassion can especially be seen in the Sermon of the Mount, where He highlights the suffering of those who are being dismissed as unimportant, and then He tells them how they will be vindicated. They must regard themselves as blessed, or happy because their cries, which are real, are being heard, and their circumstances will be changed. They will be restored. Those who mourn, will be comforted, those who are humble, and not arrogant, are blessed, those who hunger for righteousness, what is right and just, will receive it. In there He sees the pain and suffering and gives the promise of righteousness and change and transformation of their circumstances.

### **III. When Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them.**

In our Matthew passage Jesus is sending His disciples out for a specific mission. They were to speak about the Kingdom of heaven, and to make disciples of those in Israel first. They would be sent out to other nations later, as we learned last week. The background to that

mission we find in verses 35 – 37, when Jesus noticed something in the crowds who were following Him. We know that He always had crowds following Him throughout His ministry on earth. He was always sensitive to anyone in need, anyone who would touch Him, and then He would respond by doing a miracle, healing them. Time and time again He would be filled with emotion, and that emotion would prompt the kind of action needed that would change the lives of people. So, here in Matthew He saw something in the crowds that prompted Him to have compassion on them. They were harassed and helpless, says one commentary. Additional research of the text talks about them being oppressed, exhausted, and that they had a lack of direction. They were like sheep without a shepherd. When He saw them in their distress, verse 36 says, He had compassion on them. The best translation I could find was that “His heart went out” to them. He was filled with an emotion so strong that He was captivated by what He saw. They needed help. He then tells His disciples that the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. The harvest was this crowd of people in distress, oppressed and helpless. They needed help, they needed leaders, shepherds who would take care of them. There are not enough workers. Pray, He says, to God to send out the right people to go into the crowds and bring them in, take care of them.

#### **IV. The Mission of the Disciples**

Jesus did not hesitate after He saw this crowd in distress. He called His disciples to Him in the first few verses in chapter 10, and gave them the authority to heal the sick, raise the dead, drive out demons and much more. They will be empowered to do what He did, and they will go out into the villages and bring about a message of hope and change.

They were to travel light, go into the homes of people and bring them peace. They need to know that this divine message would not be received well by everyone, because of the content of it. Love God and your neighbor as yourself, and elsewhere in Matthew Jesus says, I love justice, mercy, and faithfulness, and in another passage, I love mercy, not sacrifice. It is not an easy message to tell those who oppressed these same crowds who followed Jesus. It was a mission fraught with danger. They will speak to ordinary people, as well as governors and Kings and Gentiles and give testimony about Him, the works He did, His message, and they will have to defend what they were talking about. They will be

hated and persecuted, because the message they would bring is about Him and the values He wanted to bestow on this world, the values of compassion and love and justice and mercy. They would go against the leaders of the day who may not have the same compassion as Jesus, and the change He wanted to see for the people and these crowds in distress. What a task, what a challenge!

#### **V. We too have crowds today, do we not...?**

I do not have to tell you that we have crowds all over the country and the world today, right? These are crowds with messages of pain, distress and anger, crowds with needs that need to be heard and met. We switch on the TV, or read the newspapers, go on-line and there are the crowds. We cannot ignore them. The gruesome death of George Floyd, a black man, by a white police officer, and the deaths of many others have brought crowds of people into the streets, filled with so much emotion. That kind of emotion is deep, and it needs to come out somehow. I need to say, that we all would agree and acknowledge that there are good police officers who care for us, and who care for the work they are called to do. It is also true, we see, that what happened to George Floyd has challenged many police departments across the country to re-evaluate their policies and practices, which in turn is creating its own tensions, which need to be addressed as well.

I too, was part of crowds in South Africa during apartheid, when we as people of color were suffering our own oppression. I too, as a seminary student joined my fellow seminarians and pastors and leaders and thousands of others into the streets to call for justice and change. So, I know what it means to be in a crowd that is in distress. I saw the change happen then when former President Nelson Mandela and others were released. I was filled with joy and relief to finally be free and have the profound experience that my skin color mattered. I saw how Madiba (endearing name for Nelson Mandela) brought us together and spoke to us and healed our wounds. I became a person whose full humanity had been restored and healed. Maybe some of you have been part of the crowds as well saying no to the injustices, and have your own stories to tell?

In my mediation and reconciliation work for the last 27 years I have worked with thousands of people, in South Africa, in the US and around the world. I have worked with

small and large groups. I have seen a lot of pain and anger and distress, and I had the opportunity to dig into the reasons why people are so angry and unhappy and in distress. They would let me in and seeing their pain would fill me with deep compassion, and that compassion would lead me to help find common ground and peace and healing. I have worked with leaders in churches and workplaces, with senior management and middle management. I have seen how unresolved issues lead to pain and anger and that things will never be the same unless we see the pain and do something about it to change it for the better for the people involved.

#### **VI. Jesus calls us to heal the crowds**

There are all kinds of crowds, small and large. They are made up of all kinds of people with all kinds of needs and concerns, and emotions, and agendas. I am wondering what Jesus' reaction would be today if He were to be among the crowds? What would His message be? How would He react since He is always filled with compassion? What would He do?

As a person of color, I have been deeply affected by what has happened to George Floyd and others, and as a pastor I feel called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, listening, seeing, and feeling the compassion myself. I feel that it is important to preach about the need for racial justice and change and healing and transformation. The pain and anger we see ultimately affect us all, as individuals and as a church, and so I ask that all of us reflect on how Jesus Christ is speaking to us and how His compassion inspires us to think and act during a time like this.

May God speak to our hearts and give us wisdom to respond in ways that will be to God's glory and for the healing of this country and this world. Amen