

As Jesus crests a small hill, he sees the road stretching out before him to a little town. At the edge of that town stands a crowd, milling, talking, waiting... He's seen this so many times before. Everywhere he goes, word goes ahead that he is coming. Crowds gather, their souls desperate for goodness and bodies aching for health. And the crowds are always the same: women, men, and children; some sick, some hungry, some battling demons; most of them poor and all of them crushed under the suffocating knee of the Roman Empire. As Jesus' gaze falls upon these troubled people, he feels a knot in his stomach.

Our gospel reading today opens with Jesus continuing his preaching tour, healing and tending to large crowds as they gather to hear him. We hear that Jesus sees these crowds and has *compassion* for them because they are *harassed* and *helpless*. But our translation of these words as "compassion," "harassed," and "helpless" capture only a sliver of the emotion the Greek words here convey.

When Jesus sees the crowds, he doesn't just have compassion on them. He experiences *splagchnizomai* (σπλαγχνίζομαι), which is one of my absolute favorite Greek words. It is a verb and it comes from the word *splagchnon* (σπλάγγνον) which means intestines. Jesus literally feels "bowel-y". He's gutted. When someone experiences *splagchnizomai*, they experience a deep, visceral emotion. It is a feeling of compassion that rests not only in your heart but in your gut. This is the same word Luke uses to describe the Father's feelings when the prodigal son returns home. It is a deep compassion rooted in affection and love.

Next we hear that the crowds are "harassed" and "helpless." The word translated as "harassed" is the Greek word *skullo* (σκούλλω). *Skullo* is a verb that means "to skin, flay, rend, or mangle"; but it can also mean "to trouble, vex, annoy, harass, or distress." The idea is that these poor people are torn apart and raw, ripped open by the various evils and maladies that plague them.

The final word, translated as "helpless," is *rhipto* (ρίπτω), which doesn't really mean "helpless" at all. *Rhipto* means "to throw down." The crowd, in effect, carries the spirit of someone who has been harassed so badly that they have fallen to the floor in the fetal position. We might say that such people are "downcast." This crowd has been ripped open and shoved to the ground by life.

So when we read that Jesus has compassion on these harassed and helpless crowds, you get a better sense of what is really being said. Jesus has a visceral compassion for this group of distressed and downtrodden people.

But it doesn't end there; Jesus' feeling of gut-deep compassion is just the beginning. Jesus feels his compassion and then turns to his disciples and sends them out to minister to the world. For Jesus, compassion leads to action. He sees the sufferings of the crowd and immediately sends his followers out to do something about it. Their orders are straightforward: the disciples are to go and proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near and then cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Jesus does not simply pity the crowd and then

forget about them, and he won't let his disciples do so either. For Jesus, true compassion leads to action.

It's easy to read this passage and think, "Wait. Why does Jesus send the disciples out? Can't he do all these things himself?" It's true. He can, and if we look back just a chapter or two, we'll see that he already has. Jesus tells the disciples to proclaim the good news, something he did earlier in chapter four. He tells them to cure the sick, which he does five times over the course of chapters eight and nine. He tells them to raise the dead, which he does in chapter nine. He tells them to cleanse lepers, which he does in chapter eight. He tells them to cast out demons which he does in both chapters eight and nine. As a matter of fact, we don't even need to look any further back than the first verse of this reading, wherein we hear that Jesus goes from town to town preaching the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and illness.

You're all familiar with the phrase "what would Jesus do?" One commentator, reflecting on this passage, remarked that it might be more useful for us to ask "what *did* Jesus do?" Here, at the end of chapter nine and the beginning of chapter ten, Jesus instructs his disciples to go out and continue the work that he has already started. If the disciples are wondering what to do, they need only remember what their master did. Jesus sets an example for his disciples to follow.

Jesus' command to proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons is not just for the early disciples; it's for us, too. Jesus asks us to go out into the world and do the same things he did. The order of these things is important. Jesus says that we are first to proclaim the good news, and then to cure, raise, cleanse, and cast out.

First, disciples are called to *proclaim* the good news, then they are called to *demonstrate* the good news. Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. We get the sense that the Kingdom is close, that it is not quite here yet, but that it is on its way. When Jesus' disciples cure, raise, cleanse, and cast out, they testify to the Kingdom that is coming. When the disciples cure a sick person, they testify to the future when all sickness will disappear; when the disciples raise someone from the dead, they testify to the future when there will be no more death; when the disciples cleanse a leper, they testify to a future when all people will be clean; when the disciples cast out demons, they testify to a future when there will be no more evil.

When we follow in Jesus' footsteps, curing, cleansing, and casting out, we do so as an act of hope, as a way of saying "the Kingdom of Heaven is coming, and when it gets here all the things that rip you open and throw you down will finally come to an end."

If you hear nothing else in this sermon, hear this: true compassion leads to action. I'll say it again: true compassion leads to action.

Our passage begins with Jesus having a gut-deep, visceral feeling of compassion for a crowd full of people who are suffering all kinds of different calamities, maladies, and tyrannies. Jesus feels

Jim Vitale
June 14, 2020

Compassion to Action
Matthew 9:35-10:8

that compassion and then allows that feeling to drive him toward action; and he instructs his disciples to do the same.

So how have you experienced that gut-deep compassion lately? Where have you felt *splagchnizomai*? I felt *splagchnizomai* a couple times over these past weeks.

I felt it as I watched and listened to the testimonies of my black friends as they posted on social media, lamenting all the ways they feel devalued, talking about all the ways they have been ripped open and thrown down. Even now, I feel that gut-deep compassion, and I am trying to allow it to drive me toward action, toward casting out the demons of racism that possess me, my race, my nation, and my world.

I felt that gut-deep compassion as I watched my one-year-old nephew struggle in a hospital in Minneapolis, fighting off COVID and salmonella at the same time. I feel it now as my brother-and-sister-in-law and their little family move into a two-week quarantine to protect the greater world from their son's illness. That gut-level compassion makes me want to heal the sick as Jesus did and to support every effort to put an end to coronavirus and every other illness that takes lives, separates families, and ruins livelihoods.

I pray that these true experiences of compassion will lead me to action because I want to see these hardships end. I want my actions to be a testimony to the coming Kingdom of Heaven, a statement that the harassments and trouble and oppression of this world will one day be no more.

People of God, as followers of Jesus, we don't get to look the other way. We don't get to pity people, feel bad for them, and then forget about them. If we are to be followers of Jesus, then in the face of deep suffering, we must allow ourselves to be moved by a deeper compassion, one that leads to action.

So in the coming week, pay attention to the *splagchnizomai*, that gut-level feeling of compassion; and if in that moment you don't know what action to take, then simply pray. Say, "God, I know you have given me this deep compassion; now lead me to action. Let me not only *tell* people that your Kingdom is coming; let me *show* them."

Amen.