

Sermon

June 18, 2023 [Matthew 9:35 – 10:8]

When We See What Shouldn't Be

Guest Pastor John Barich

Jesus is on the move! He's teaching, preaching and healing. Jesus is bringing his way of life to all who will hear him, and his energy comes from his compassion. Compassion motivates him to action, and so, when he sees troubled and abandoned folks, he identifies with them; his heart goes out to them. Sometimes as we read through these Gospel stories – can't you just hear him sigh, sometimes, at the suffering condition of God's good creation?

And what Jesus sees *shouldn't be*! The shepherd-leaders who *should* be tending the sheep, don't take notice. In fact, it's usually the leadership who's *causing* the trouble and responsible for their sense of abandonment. So, Jesus is going to say something, and he's going to do something about this. He's an agent of change, and a fierce critic. He's going to stand up for them and enlist others to join him.

But as we all know, it's a sad but predictable fact that those who stand up often get knocked down. It's Juneteenth this weekend, that we're celebrating as a holiday. Tomorrow's the actual day, the 19th, and that commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger came to Galveston, Texas to inform a reluctant community that President Abraham Lincoln two years earlier had freed the slaves, and so he was there to press the locals to comply with that directive. That's June 19. By August 6, he had been relieved of his command.

And maybe whistleblowers are a prime contemporary example for us. A woman reports accounting abuses at Wells Fargo and her supervisor thanks her and notes her courage, and within a week she is let go for no apparent reason.

Daniel Ellsberg, perhaps the nation's most famous whistleblower, died just this past Friday at the age of 92. The Pentagon Papers leak, 7000 pages of top-secret documents outlining the secret history of the Vietnam War, would end up helping take down President Nixon and would help end the War in Vietnam. Well, the Nixon administration would go on to take extraordinary measures to silence and punish Ellsberg, including breaking into his psychiatrist's office to look at the notes. But the government's misconduct led to the charges against him being dismissed. Criticism and cover-up often go together, and part of the cover-up is to silence and eliminate criticism.

These harassed and helpless folks do not escape Jesus' notice or concern. In fact, his compassion for them triggers the expansion of his mission. Jesus is now going to move disciples to his vision of how things should be, and now the images move from troubled and abandoned, to ripe grapes, and bursting wheat. There is possibility in this distress, a harvest ready to be gathered in.

But who's going to do it? The work that needs to be done is more than Jesus' predilection and mission; it's God's mission to God's people! And so, Jesus instructs his disciples to "pray to the master of the harvest for more laborers," which is a clever instruction, because as they pray for laborers, it will slowly dawn on them that *they are the laborers* they're praying for. How many times have you folks at Queen Anne said that? "We need to do this, who's going to do it?" Then you pray. And you look in the mirror and you say, "It's up to us. It's up to me."

The Twelve become laborers and continue the work of Jesus, and they're compelled by the same compassion that drives Jesus. And here their names are made explicit. They are specific, concrete, identifiable people. The expanding mission has taken on flesh again.

And then Jesus focuses them on the target population. The sheep without shepherds, the crowds that cause Jesus to be moved with compassion. And the disciples are to tell them: the days of their distress and lostness are over. The reign of God has come near. And then, they're to manifest the love of God and the compassion of Jesus through actions that address their trouble and abandonment. And whatever action is deemed necessary, the underlying concern is to lavish love and life on people who've never experienced it. And since this love and life is what the Twelve have freely experienced from God and Jesus, they are to freely pass it on to others. They're just giving to others what they have already received.

And the preparation for carrying out the work of this kingdom is to experience it in yourself. Now I can see that we've all lived long enough to know that all attempts to change the world are long-haul projects of success and failure. But since we know that, also, trust that the heart that created the desire in you will also sustain it.

And as we hear Jesus call to proclaim and cure, raise and heal and drive out, the mission now takes flesh in us, and the love of God and the compassion of Jesus will move us to action, when *we* see things that just shouldn't be.

In the name of Jesus,
Amen.