

Sermon on Matthew 9:35-10:23
Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 17, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

It's been an eventful week in the United States of America, and in our local community of St. Paul. This past Wednesday morning our nation's capitol was rocked by a mass-shooting in a park, where a man armed with a rifle opened fire on Republican lawmakers who were practicing for a charity baseball game. House GOP Majority whip Steve Scalise of Louisiana was critically wounded, and several aides and Capitol police were hit; the shooter was killed by police. It was not the only mass shooting this week – there was another on the same day in San Francisco. Mass shootings and senseless violence are a common occurrence these days, with an over-abundance of weapons available, and a plentiful supply of anger in the air. Last Monday the nation remembered 50 killed and 53 injured by a lone shooter at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando in 2016, and today we remember the nine shot by another lone gunman in Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina at a Bible Study prayer meeting.

Way closer to home, our church was 2 blocks away from the “epicenter” of protest following a rally Saturday night at the State Capitol and a march to protest the verdict of a jury acquitting Officer Jeronimo Janez in the fatal shooting of Philando Castille in a traffic stop last July. The protest march shut down the Interstate 94 Freeway under the Dale Street Bridge for several hours after 10:30 pm. So this church was just blocks away from the school where Philando worked as a beloved cafeteria supervisor at JJ Hill Montessori School on Selby Avenue, and the height of an emotional evening when almost 2,000 protesters shut down the freeway a short walk away from here. It was a night of anger, grief, shock, disappointment, and disbelief – that a beloved, peaceful African American man from this community could be shot and killed by a peace officer, and the officer be acquitted. We will continue to live with the feelings of injustice, mistrust and outrage over a pattern that never seems to change: a black man is stopped by police, the officer becomes startled or afraid, and shoots the black man dead. It was a senseless tragedy which has also devastated the police officer and his family. This is the present context in a large part of the community these days, while many try to retain a sense of normalcy as they go on with their lives.

Context is critical to how you and I approach the scriptures we read in worship on a Sunday morning – or any morning, in fact – and try to interpret their meaning for us in our lives. For whenever we study scripture, we don't merely study the “words”. We have to consider the context – for the people to whom the text was originally written, as well as the national and community context in which

we live today. Then we also have to consider our own personal context – what is going on in your life and mine, which influences greatly how we hear what we are reading in the Bible.

As we read the passages today from the Old Testament, New Testament and the Gospel, we hear different things, depending on what we are going through. As a pastor preparing to preach on Sunday, I have been living with these texts in a week that has brought changing emotions and lessons in life. Through most of the week, I lived with the usual day-to-day events of church life – working in an office, showing hospitality to the youth from North and South Dakota who have been living here in the church all week, and preparing for this worship service. I also visited Joe and Ruth at home, following Joe’s heart bypass surgery, and his. But then it seems that everything “hit the fan” by Wednesday, with the shooting in Washington D.C. I have also been preparing for a wedding which I presided at on Saturday in downtown Minneapolis, for a young woman named Ashley, who worshipped here as a little girl, and our family has known all her life. On Friday I led prayers here for my deceased father’s cousin, whom we buried at Fort Snelling National Cemetery on Friday afternoon. Then on my way home, I heard the news of the jury’s decision on the Philando Castille shooting, and saw how many in our community were devastated and upset. That’s the kind of week it has been for me. Some pastors have said they threw away their prepared sermons on Friday, and started over! Lucky for me, I didn’t have this problem! I had no sermon! I had no time to begin until Saturday afternoon, so “one draft” is all I get with this sermon!

And so I read this text from a multiple, competing set of emotions. I could probably write a different sermon each day of the week! But what I have come to focus on is the beginning of the gospel text in Matthew, when Jesus was passing through the cities and villages in Galilee, **teaching** in the synagogues, **proclaiming (or preaching) the kingdom of God, and curing** every disease and sickness. Teaching, preaching, and healing – that was Jesus’ work. And the more he did this, the more the crowds grew.

And here is the key to the passage: *“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* This was no ordinary speaking tour, where an author or teacher brings a canned speech or reading to every town. Jesus came to town to proclaim the good news of God’s love to the people. He kept his eyes and ears open as he entered each town, and he was very perceptive in knowing what every person’s need was. He saw them in their distress and helplessness, and he had compassion for all of them!

This is how Jesus looks upon you and me today, and all the people of this world. He sees us in our helplessness, in our failures and need, and he has

compassion for us. He sees you, he hears you, and he understands what you are going through. That's the good news that comes to you and me today.

So what did Jesus do about his compassionate feelings for the people he encountered in Galilee, as he travelled among them, and met them face to face? He prayed for them, but he didn't stop there. He preached good news to them, taught them what the scriptures said, and he healed them of their diseases. But he didn't stop there either! He also **sent his disciples – twelve of them – out into the communities to also proclaim the good news of God's kingdom come near, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.**

They weren't anything special, these disciples. Matthew names them: Simon Peter (the one who would deny him), Andrew his brother, James and John (the sons of Zebedee) – most all of them fishermen. There were also Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew – the tax collector (one of the most despised jobs in every town), James, Thaddeus, Simon, and Judas Iscariot, who would betray Jesus. What a motley crew, you might say. Not the saints we glorify today! But you know what? *Jesus gave these twelve disciples the very same ministry tasks he did himself!* He didn't send them out with a bunch of stuff – no gold, silver, or copper in their belts – no abundance of cash! No bag, no laptop, no smartphone or messaging system. Just a belt, a staff, one tunic, and one pair of sandals – no more than necessary to do the job. The important thing is that Jesus gave his followers all they needed – he told them the good news and taught them to share it. He also taught them to keep their eyes and ears open, to look and listen for the needs of the people, and *to respond with compassion to what they saw and heard!*

It is the same task which Jesus sends us out to do today, look and respond with compassion to a people who are harassed and helpless in so many different ways. We are not so special, but we are no less or more gifted than any of Jesus' disciples – but they did have faith and trust in the person of Jesus, whom they believed was the Savior sent by God. We are also troubled and under duress – we can't help it! We are like everyone else in this 21st century. But we are called to proclaim the good news of God which we have heard, to those whom we encounter in our daily lives. Like the young parent who feels ill-equipped or unprepared to be a parent; like the person in mid-life crisis because they unexpectedly lost their job, their medical care or a house; like the person coping with the death of a spouse, or a parent, or devastated by the loss of a child; and for those who have been abandoned in a relationship. Like the immigrant or black man who feels fear whenever he sees the police, when he has done nothing wrong. And for all of us who exist with the consequences of racism, prejudice, injustice, violence or abuse – with the resulting anger, despair, impatience, helplessness, and fear. We are all like “sheep without a shepherd” in this world, unless we have faith in the God who has made us, and loves us like a parent loves their child. Through the gospel, you

and I hear of the love by which God sent Jesus to show his compassion for us, to proclaim the good news that gives us life, to heal us in our brokenness, and then to die on a cross for our sins. When you and I discover this love which God has for us, we can only respond to it with faith and gratitude.

So Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans how when we have faith, we then can have peace with God, and even *“boast in our sufferings – because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”*

This is the free gift that we have received from God, faith and hope even in the midst of our brokenness. This is the gift that we have been sent out by Jesus our Lord to share with others – for the people of this world sorely need to hear of this faith, hope, and love of God in Christ Jesus! *For the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. So we ask the Lord of harvest, therefore, to SEND US OUT as workers into his harvest field.”* May God make us worthy. Thanks be to God. Amen.