

“Open Our Eyes: See All the People”

Matthew 9:35-10:8

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on material from Discipleship Ministries of the General Board of Discipleship, of the United Methodist Church

First things first. Those are words to live by. Their meaning is pretty obvious: you need to focus on the initial steps, the place to begin, before you do anything else. Try to put together a model airplane or a piece of furniture from IKEA without following the steps in order and you're bound to have problems. Believe me, I know from personal experience, from putting together IKEA bookcases.

First things first. Doing things out of order is generally not going to get you where you want to go.

If you grew up in the 60s, like I did, you remember the songs from one of the most popular films ever, *The Sound of Music*...maybe you remember one of the songs Maria Von Trapp, played by Julie Andrews, sang ... The first words are: “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start, when you read you begin with [A, B, C], when you sing you begin with [Do, Re, Mi]...” Maria knew: first things first.

Jesus knew this too. In our lesson today, Jesus had been traveling the countryside proclaiming the good news of God’s coming kingdom, calling people to repentance, healing the sick, raising the dead, and casting out demons. This is what Jesus was sent to earth for: to proclaim, in word and deed, the coming of God’s kingdom of reconciliation on the earth. Now he’s reached a point in his ministry where he doesn’t want to do this alone. Now he needs to share the work of God with his followers, to empower them to do the same things he had been doing. There was plenty of work to do.

Where does Jesus begin? “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them...” That’s it right there, he saw the crowds; he saw the people. The mission of Jesus to the world begins with seeing all the people and by seeing them in their needs, he felt compassion, the deep compassion of God for them.

- To see the people means he wasn’t just passing on through the neighborhood, hurrying off to the next speaking engagement.
- To see the people meant he was right there, in plain sight of everyone, and they were in his plain sight—Jesus came near enough to see for himself, and to feel for himself, the needs of the crowds.

What does it mean to see the people; I mean, really see them as they are? To see them without prejudging them because of where they come from, the accent they speak with, the color of their skin, or anything else.

What is it like to see people as worthy of compassion and care?

- Maybe it would help to stand in someone else’s place for a moment;
- to consider what it means, what it feels like to be seen, as opposed to being overlooked or ignored. Most of us have probably felt that way sometime in our lives.

Jesus doesn’t overlook or ignore anyone. Jesus sees all the people, just as they are; Jesus sees all of us, just as we are, and still manages to love and accept us. Can that make a profound difference in our lives, in our hearts, in our self-image? I think it can.

Jesus sees the crowd and they appear to him as sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless.

That shepherd imagery is not new for us, is it? Jesus calls himself “the Good Shepherd” in the Gospel of John.

- The good shepherd is the one who cares deeply for the sheep.
- He goes out and comes in with them, leads them to good pasture, protects them from predators, and goes after them when they get lost.

The Good Shepherd draws on the deeper image of the kings of Israel who, like shepherds, were supposed to watch over God’s flock, the people. They didn’t do their job, so God promised to do it himself.

We hear that from the prophet Ezekiel:

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered... (Ezekiel 34)

Sheep without a shepherd...that’s not a pretty picture. Sheep without a shepherd don’t know where to go. They become prey for those who are out to kill them. But Jesus has compassion on the people—he sees them as God sees them—and he knows it is God’s will that all be gathered into the loving arms of grace.

That’s why he calls the disciples.

Jesus gathers himself a team of folk from different walks of life. The twelve disciples were all men. But as the church grew, women took on vital leadership roles. We can think of a few examples, like:

- Mary, who was the first to see Jesus after the Resurrection and told the Twelve Jesus is alive. Some say she was the first apostle—meaning one who is sent—because an angel told her to go tell the others the good news.
- Phoebe, a deacon and leader of a house church in Cenchrae, in Greece. She probably carried one of Paul's letter—the one we know as Romans—to the young church in Rome.
- Women played essential roles in our own Wesleyan history beginning with Susannah Wesley. Her love, compassion, discipline and faithfulness raised up John and Charles Wesley, who God used to rock England in the eighteenth century with the Methodist movement.

The point here, beloved, is this: The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not for any one group of people to control; it is the Gospel for all people everywhere, no matter their race, gender, color, class, or creed. Jesus calls all disciples to share in his mission to proclaim the good news and to bring healing and hope in his name.

BUT...first things first... Before we share in this mission, we need to see all the people. I'm wondering this morning if that's part of the reason Jesus called together a group of men, to begin with, who were so different.

- Some were fishermen.
- Some we don't know much about.
- There was tax collector (Matthew).
- There was a zealot (Simon the Cananaean).
- And there was one who betrayed him (Judas Iscariot).

Think about the extreme differences between Matthew the tax collector, a functionary of the Roman state, and Simon the Zealot, who wanted to kill Romans. Chances are, they didn't agree on much of anything. Maybe Jesus chose all these men from all these different backgrounds so that together, they could see all the people...through different lenses...through their different life experiences, their different world views.

Jesus sees them all with compassion and calls together his team of twelve disciples, the group one commentator called "an ensemble of care."¹ According to Matthew, Jesus calls them in order for them to be those laborers who are so few.

- Jesus did not call this community together for its own sake.
- He did not call them to tend to their own souls,
- Or to make sure they were right with God.
- They are called together to go out, to be the church that sees the crowds.

First things first: We are called to see all the people. To see them through the different lenses of our life experiences. And, when we take the time to look long enough, we'll start to see ourselves in them. We'll come to realize, we are like them, and they are like us, in all the ways that really matter; to see them as people who are:

- Flawed.
- Beautiful.
- Capable of making horrendous mistakes that hurt other people.
- Capable of performing great acts of beauty with their lives.
- Able to hate other people without much cause.
- Able to love deeply and compassionately.

In a few words: we'll see all the people as human beings, just like us.

Seeing all the people simply means to appreciate them for who they are: as people who are beloved by God.

First things first, we see all the people. We see them and their needs.

- We don't approach them with neat answers to life's questions all tied up in a package.
- We don't go to our neighbors because we want to fix them—as if we had the power to do that—or to threaten them, or chastise them.
- We don't clobber them with our theology or our preferences for how to worship.

- We come empty-handed so that we can see our neighbor just as they are; and they can see us. There's the trick...just as they are...just as I am...can we see all the people? Can we see ourselves? Just as I am...without one plea...but that thy blood...was shed for me... and that thou bidst me...come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come. Just as I am...though tossed about...with many a conflict...many a doubt...fights and fears within, without...O lamb of God, I come. Just as I am...thou wilt receive...wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve...because thy promise I believe...O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Jesus called his disciples in, together, in order for them to be sent out, together...to go into the world...to see all the people:

- Maybe we'll see them as harassed and helpless, but harassed by whom and helpless in front of what, and we'll ask what can we do about it?
- And maybe we'll see them as resources of strength and grace that cause us to be amazed...I don't know about you, but I've seen some people in my life with remarkable strength and grace...people who have survived diseases, overcome poverty, put up with prejudice, made a way in life where there seemed no way ahead.
- And having seen these people, we will give thanks to God for the blessing of seeing them.

Most likely, when we look long enough and hard enough, we'll see ourselves in them. For we are like them, and they are like us in all the ways that really matter. And maybe, just maybe, we'll be moved by the same compassion that moved Jesus, to help where we can, and to love where we can.

May that be our prayer this week. **First things first: see all the people.** And let Jesus take us from there.
Amen.