

Text: Matthew 9:35 – 10:8  
Title: Harassed and Helpless  
Date: 06.18.17  
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In the early eighties, when I was in my early twenties, I drove a church van on Sunday mornings. As the city woke I'd drive around picking up people for worship, listening to black gospel music on the radio, and soaking in the sights, smells, and sounds of the south side.

Madeline Green lived above a liquor store near 53rd Street. I'd pull up, put out a little wooden step, and then help push her up and into the van. With too much blush, smudged lipstick, a cheap wig, and her swollen ankles stuffed into house slippers she was colorful, if not comical. Her voice was a deep scratchy croak. She was usually nibbling on something, "to keep my sugars up." Madeline's only daughter was a crack whore, therefore Madeline often had her daughter's only son, Danny, in tow. She hovered over and smothered that young boy....

You didn't know to smile or cry with Madeline. A little loopy, a little lost, a lot lonely, without shame or restraint most conversations were about her current malady. And she always needed me to take her one more place before going home after church.

Rev. Tony Van Zanten was her minister. I lived with Rev. Tony and his family for a few months, and learned that Madeline Greene called all the time. There was always her distinctive voice,

and then some fear,  
or some complaint,  
or some need,  
or some loneliness,  
or something....

She called looking for a ride to the drugstore,  
looking for few dollars until her check came,  
looking for help with Danny,  
looking for someone to pray with,  
looking for someone to listen....

At two in the morning, during dinner, before breakfast, in the middle of the afternoon, she called and Rev. Tony answered the phone, every time, with gentleness, love, and firmness.

He would listen, make her laugh a little, and pray with her. He would take her to the doctor and bring her food. Once she called to say that she was cold because she didn't have any long underwear; Rev. Tony went out and got her long johns. The next Sunday Madeline stood up and testified about Rev. Tony buying her new drawers. Thanks be to God!

When Madeline Green died no one noticed. She was difficult to be around. Her personality, her poverty, and her persistence eventually pushed others away. She was hard to like and even harder to love. But, even in her death she was abused....

In a complete surprise, a son or an imposter showed up, cancelled the funeral, had her cremated to save money, took what little she had in this world, and disappeared. When Rev. Tony arrived for the funeral there was nothing there. Not even a body.

Mistreated in life and in death, Madeline Green was  
tossed aside,  
invisible,  
unimportant,  
beat down,  
harassed and helpless.

Dear friends, Matthew writes the story of Jesus as the coming of the Kingdom of God. After the birth story, he lays out the contours of the kingdom with the words of Jesus, and then he stacks up stories of the kingdom as Jesus heals a leper, a paralytic, a dead girl, a sick woman, two blind men, one mute, and two possessed by demons. A new ethic and the repair of all that's broken would define this coming kingdom. Our text offers a brief summary:

*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd.*

The phrase "harassed and helpless" has the sense of those who are plundered or violated and those who are knocked down, prostrate, and unable to get up. It is a powerful and peculiar phrase....

It is a powerful and peculiar phrase...

When the President feels harassed, when Evangelicals feel harassed, when African Americans feel harassed, when gay folks feel harassed, when Muslims feel harassed, when immigrants and refugees feel harassed, when the white working class feels harassed, when everyone is hunkered and bunkered down in their own tribe, it is a powerful and peculiar phrase.

There was a west Michigan church youth group in Roseland this week. They worked on houses, helped in the kitchen, and put on a coat of fresh paint. One of their leaders pointed out a couple times that they come from a place "with a different work ethic." What he saw, in his few days on the south side, were people who should pull themselves up and work harder. Their poverty was their failure and their fault. It was a matter of ethics. They weren't helpless.

*When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd.*

It is a powerful and peculiar phrase....

None of us want to feel harassed. None of us want to see others as helpless. And yet, almost every day we're flooded with the images of cops, criminals and innocent lives lost, refugees fleeing war-torn-hell-holes, alcoholism destroying families, the relentless march of Alzheimer's, patterns of mental illness being passed on generation to generation....

*When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless...*

Rev. Tony often used that phrase when talking about the broken spirits of homeless men and women, the desperation of addicts, or the despair of burying loved ones lost to gun violence. I don't know if Rev. Tony saw Madeline Green as "harassed and helpless," but I do know that he saw her with compassion.

He saw the image of God in her.

He saw the beauty and brokenness of all of us in her.

He saw her completely; and loved her concretely.

He saw her with compassion.

Maybe I was too young or too callous, maybe I was just normal, but I was overwhelmed and uneasy around Madeline Green. I looked away. I'm not sure that I ever saw her with compassion. Without driving the church van, I never would have seen her. She was invisible in this world. If you drove by, and she was on the curb waiting for the bus, you wouldn't see her. She was just one more of the faceless-nameless-poor.

The gospels are chock-full of stories where Jesus saw something in people that others ignored, neglected, forgot, or turned away from. And, in this passage Jesus sees the crowds with compassion.

He doesn't look away or look through.

He doesn't look with blame or boredom.

He doesn't look with disinterest or disdain.

He looks with compassion.

And, as I've noted before, the word translated as "compassion" has the sense of something connected to the bowels. Jesus saw people and was moved from the deepest places of his being. He saw them in all their beauty and brokenness, he saw them harassed and helpless, and he had compassion.

Listen to Karl Barth about the compassion of Jesus:

*The expression is a strong one which defies adequate translation. He was not only affected by the misery which surrounded him – sympathy in our modern sense is far too feeble a word – but it went right into his heart, into himself, so that it was*

*now his misery.... In the last analysis, it was no longer theirs at all, but his....  
The cry of those who suffered was only an echo. Strictly speaking, it had already  
been superseded. It was superfluous. Jesus made it his own.*

That is a staggering claim.

Jesus sees people with compassion and takes their whole experience into himself.

Their brokenness becomes his brokenness.

Their despair becomes his despair.

Their death becomes his....

Jesus sees us ~ harassed and helpless ~ takes us into himself and makes us  
his own. And in that, the Kingdom of God has come near. That is the  
remarkable good news of God in Christ. God sees you and I with  
compassion. Thanks be to God.

And then, dear friends, there is a wonderful twist. Jesus sees the crowds and from his  
bowels of mercy Jesus asks for help. He turns to his disciples and says:

I see the people, but I need help.

I see the crowds, but I can't do it all.

I have eyes to see, but I need more hands and feet.

I have compassion, but I need co-workers.

I see the Kingdom, but I need kingdom builders.

I see the work, but I need laborers.

Jesus doesn't say he needs great preachers, brilliant scholars, gifted administrators,  
talented musicians, inspiring visionaries, or well-heeled-people-of-means. He says, "I  
need laborers." The language here is that of common everyday laborers. In the kingdom  
of compassion there is room for everyone. All can roll up their sleeves and get to work.

Well. What if this morning we join the work of Jesus?

If you are looking for something to do, if you are looking for a way to respond to  
the love and acceptance of God in Christ, then...

maybe there is someone who you can see with compassion,

maybe there is someone who you can love concretely,

maybe there is someone for whom you can be a laborer of Jesus.

It may call for changing who we see and how we see.

It may call for work that goes unnoticed and lacks glamor.

It may call for taking the brokenness of another into your heart.

It may call for reaching beyond where we're comfortable.

But, the Kingdom has come....

Even as Jesus has compassion for you, so he has compassion for all people, and Jesus  
prays for laborers.

Who do you see?

Who can you love and serve?

Amen.