

“Cared For and Called Out”

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Covid 13

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Matthew 9:35-10:5a The Message

Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. “What a huge harvest!” he said to his disciples. “How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!”

The prayer was no sooner prayed than it was answered. Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives. This is the list of the twelve he sent: Simon (they called him Peter, or “Rock”); Andrew his brother; Philip; Bartholomew; Thomas; Matthew, the tax man; John; his brother James; Zebedee’s son, James, son of Alphaeus; Thaddaeus; Simon, the Canaanite and Judas Iscariot (who later turned on him).

Jesus is now in the heart of his ministry. With the help of the twelve, he is going to town after town. In those towns and villages, he is teaching the people that the Kingdom of God is near, that God is in the neighbourhood and at work among them. He is healing their sick and tending to the large crowds of hurting people.

As he is doing this ministry, he comments that the “harvest is plentiful and the labourers are few.” In other words, the need out there is huge! There is so much hurt and brokenness and people in need that it’s unending and overwhelming. I don’t know if Jesus felt overwhelmed, but I can tell you he knew that the need was greater than he could meet on his own.

Have you ever felt that? That the needs of the world are so great, maybe even too great for you to do anything about it?

Recently I have felt overwhelmed by the protests, particularly in the U.S but also here in Canada, around the death of George Floyd. His death — under a knee of an almost disinterested police officer while he spoke the words: “I can’t breathe” — was horrific. It became a powerful symbol and the straw that broke the camel’s back on countless racist encounters and the massive issue of systemic racism in general.

We are beginning to see that this isn't just an American problem, but that here in Canada our history and our present are not rosy when it comes to racial justice. Black people in Canada have higher unemployment rates and lower wages. When you listen to Black Canadians, they will tell you of incident after incident of overt racism and micro-aggressions aimed at them. We are learning about the systemic racism that Indigenous peoples of Canada have experienced over centuries and is continuing today.

Now that we are in the middle of a pandemic there are many other overwhelming needs. We think of those who are unemployed or at risk of losing their business. We think of those who have medical issues and have had to face delays or the increase of mental health and addictions that even here locally have taken people's lives. The need in the world is great. Too great.

How do we respond in these situations? We could go into denial mode. I think that tends to be my fall-back place. Without even doing it consciously I throw my hands up and think: "Well there's nothing I can do about that!" and I throw up a wall between myself and an uncomfortable issue and then launch into doing the laundry or something else that seems important at the moment. Or we can rage and spew our anger online and attack people who think differently than us. When we are overwhelmed those tend to be the two temptations to go into: denial mode or helpless anger: fight or flight. I say 'helpless anger' because anger does have its place. Even Jesus got angry.

How did Jesus respond to the overwhelming need? He responded in two ways. The first thing I want you to notice is that he had compassion on the crowd. He saw the need and loved them in their need. He didn't turn his face from them — he moved towards them. He didn't respond with fight or flight, he stood with them and he loved them and he healed them. Thank God for that!

Maybe you are in that crowd that is hurting and harried. When we are the hurting ones, it is comforting to know that Jesus doesn't have a daily quota. He doesn't look at our pain and say "I'm sorry, I've comforted 50 people today and you will have to come back and line up tomorrow for comfort!" No, when you are hurting, Jesus is there. I pray that you can feel that compassion.

I know I've felt love and compassion in the last few weeks from Jesus, and from Jesus through you. Thank you so much for your compassion and care as I and my mother and family have been so in need of it, with the quick decline and loss of my father.

The Greek word for compassion is stronger than the English word. It is “*splagch-ni-zomai*” — to be moved in your gut. It’s not just sympathy, it’s deeper. Jesus sees your pain and feels it and won’t turn away from it. It’s like when God tells Moses “I have heard the groanings of my people.” God sees our tears and the tears of an enslaved and broken world, and is moved to compassion and moved to action.

So Jesus hears the pain and moves toward the people to heal, to comfort and to set free. But he does something else in this scripture. He calls out and sends out the 12. He calls them by name, and he calls them to do the same things that he is doing.

When you step back, it seems like a ridiculous thing to do. What are another 12 people – not 12 clones of Jesus, but 12 ordinary people who were trained to gut fish or collect taxes, going to do? 12 not-even-that-useful people—what use are they, up against the needs of the world? Surely Jesus could do better?

Tomorrow I begin my classes for my Doctorate of Ministry course. I have met with my classmates over Zoom a few times and I am looking forward to having meaningful conversations. We are a smaller class than planned, as a few deferred to next year; but in the group of 11 men and women there are 6 African American pastors from different denominations, 1 Palestinian Orthodox priest and 4 others from all over the United States: Chicago, California, Texas, New York, plus me in Canada. Many of them have very diverse congregations with large numbers of African Americans who are angry and hurting that nothing changes. They also have people whose businesses have been looted or damaged and are trying to clean up after rioting.

Hearing the cries, having compassion and standing with others to bring healing and life is not easy. At times it is overwhelming. We will feel unprepared, but still *we are called to follow Jesus, who goes ahead of us.*

The Dean of the Doctorate program was talking to each of us about the expectations of the courses. Rev. Dr. Gennifer Brooks is African American; originally from Barbados. She has some wonderful turns on phrases. Speaking about the work load and what we are expected to do, she said to us: “I don’t want you to flounder, but neither do I want you to fluff off!” I love that. There is hope and help for us when we flounder, when we are lost and when we are hurting.

We can expect Jesus and his followers to see and to stand with us — but as Christians, we too have a responsibility, a call, not to “fluff off” but to do something, even if it’s something small, that will help another.

What cries is God hearing today? Where is God working? Where is God sending us to work? There is no question in my mind that today God has heard the groanings of Black people who have been treated as 'less than' for centuries. Yes, God hears all of our cries, but the Almighty moves towards those who are hurting the most. He leaves the 99 sheep that are doing OK to seek out the one lost sheep that is being threatened by the wolves.

The question is, where do you want to be? Or perhaps a better question: where is Jesus calling you to be? You can be back with the 99, or the curious but not so committed followers of Jesus, or you can say: "Here I am. Send me."

Jesus sends out 12 people to have compassion and do something out of that center of love that will make a difference. That is God's response: to send that which is small and insignificant — Moses, Gideon, 12 disciples, and mustard seeds like you and like me — each of these alone are nothing, but filled with the Spirit of God, we are something!

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. I pray that the Lord will send more workers into his harvest field, and I pray that you will answer that call in the unique way that only you can.

Thanks be to God! Amen.