

Text: Matthew 9:35-10:8

Title: Our Picture of the Church

Date: 14 June 2020

For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON

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## **What has been your picture of the church during this time of isolation?**

Back in March, the last week of normal, when we had just made the decision to suspend in-person worship services for 2 weeks, we needed a picture to post on our website and social media along with the announcement.

So I snapped a picture.

Of this sanctuary. Empty. Quiet.

And it seemed fitting because our best Christian response at that time was to love our neighbour by protecting each other by not gathering together. As I turned the lights off in the sanctuary after taking the photo, I knew we made the right call but I wondered when we'd fill those pews again. When we would come back together.

I know that for many of you this picture of an empty sanctuary, an empty church, has been so discouraging. And so lonely. When we're together, we're quite the crowd. And it just feels so full. When this place is full of laughter and friendly chatter and kids running around and the way we sound when we're in worship and singing all together a favourite song of faith. It's so deeply good!

And a lot of our energy and conversations and focus has been put into getting back together. To get to the moment when we fill up the pews and get to be here again. Together again. And standing here in this still empty space, I get that. I love our bigness and our life together. And I miss it. I miss us gathered together here.

Because if a picture of an empty building is all we got to go on, then of course we want to be filling up that emptiness as soon as possible. Getting back together. 30% or whatever. Just fill up the emptiness.

**But is the picture of an empty building really the best picture of the church during this time of isolation? Is it the best picture of our congregation during this time of isolation?**

Tucked away in the gospel of Matthew is this little hinge passage we just read.

Matthew has just taken us from the heights of the Sermon on the Mount into a whirlwind depiction of Jesus' healing ministry and establishes this rhythm of preaching and healing, healing and preaching. And here Matthew provides a one sentence summary of Jesus' ministry to that point:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

And in just a few verses, Matthew is going to use the exact same words to describe the ministry of the Twelve: Proclaim. Heal.

But before we get there. Before we turn our focus to the Twelve and their mission, Matthew keeps our eyes on Jesus and offers us a glimpse into why Jesus sends them in the first place. Why Jesus gathers them and then scatters them. Why he pushes them out the door and into the villages and towns to preach and to heal.

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

Jesus isn't moved to preach the kingdom by how sinful people are around him. Or out of sense of entitlement to their souls. There's no judgement or finger waving. (Well, except at the oppressive religious leaders he encounters, but that's for a different sermon.) But out of compassion. Because the people around him were harassed and helpless.

The two words translated here as "harassed and helpless" can be more literally translated as "mangled and cast down". To walk with difficulty. To take another step toward misery. One translator moves it into modern English and says Jesus looked around saw those "who were barely making it".

And instead of looking the other way or ignoring them and going on about his more important business, Jesus sees them and his heart goes out to them. He feels compassion for these broken ones, these ones barely making it.

Then Jesus looks at those who follow him. Those who are close to him. His disciples. And helps them to see too:

The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the harvest field.

And just as the disciples are getting ready to set up a prayer meeting to pray for God to raise up workers and missionaries for them to support and post on their mission board, Jesus gathers them together and sends them out.

Into the towns and villages. Just like he does.

To heal the sick. Just like he does.

To proclaim the kingdom. Just like he does.

To be moved by compassion for those barely making it. Just like he is.

### **What's the picture of the church we get here in Matthew? In this first instance of Jesus sending out his disciples?**

This snapshot from Matthew, the picture he takes of the church, shows us a group of disciples scattered and sent into towns and villages, moved by compassion for those who are harassed and helpless, who are barely making it, to bring life and healing and hope in the name of Jesus.

This is a picture of us, too.

In pre-pandemic days, our picture of church was pretty straightforward.

For many of us, it meant coming together on Sunday mornings, connecting with folks, showing up for a program or class or ministry thing or two or three or four throughout the week. Being church meant being busy at church.

But here we are. Scattered and separate. These pews still empty. There's no being church by being busy at church. Not even for staff. And I know there's a rush to get back here.

If our picture of the church right now is only empty pews, then our only answer is to fill 'em up as quickly as possible.

### **But what if we saw ourselves more like the snapshot here in Matthew?**

Right now, we are a picture of the church. Scattered all over Waterloo Region.

In neighbourhoods and cul-de-sacs in Baden and Ayr and Waterloo

in condos and apartment buildings in Cambridge and downtown Kitchener  
on farms and open spaces in Wellesley and Bright

**And we're not just scattered and apart, but we're sent. With purpose. With mission.**

What does it look like for us to lean into this picture of the church?

To follow Jesus into the towns and villages we live in?

To look at our neighbourhoods and neighbours and towns and cities with compassion?

With special attention to those who are barely making it?

**This past week, the body of George Floyd was buried in his hometown of Houston.**

His death as one who was harassed and helpless, who was mangled and cast down, has set off a global movement of compassion and anger and protest and action. But this week, at his funeral, before his broken body was laid to rest, his life was also remembered.

And George was known and remembered as someone who looked around his neighbourhood, the Third Ward in Houston, and paid special attention to those barely making it.

In one interview, a local pastor said that most of his church's discipleship and outreach programs in the Third Ward was because of George's influence. A Christian hip-hop artist from the church was doing a benefit concert in George's neighbourhood remembers the first time he met George:

He said, 'I love what you're doing. The neighbourhood need it, the community need it, and if y'all about God's business, then that's my business...He said, 'Whatever y'all need, wherever y'all need to go, tell 'em Floyd said y'all good. I got y'all.'"

With George's help and the respect that others had for him, the congregation was welcomed in ways they would never have been without George vouching for them. A pastor that worked closely with him said:

George Floyd was a person of peace sent from the Lord that helped the gospel go forward in a place I never lived in.

George looked around his neighbourhood with compassion and saw the cycles of violence and poverty and a generation of young men without their fathers, and he worked and laboured and partnered with others to bring healing and hope in the name of Jesus into the place he lived.

These past few months have revealed so much about the world we live in and just how much work there is to do. And it can seem like an overwhelming task. We don't know where to start. The problems seem so big and so impossible.

But Jesus still pushes us out the door. Into our own town. Our own street. Our own community. Asking us to see with compassion. To look for those barely making it. Not to look the other way or go on about our more important business. But to find ways to bring healing and hope in the name of Jesus in the places we live.

Matthew doesn't tell us how the disciples did on their mission. Eventually we know they return to Jesus after being sent out, but we're not given the details. We don't know if they were successful or not. We don't know if they were confident or discouraged. Energized or fearful. We just know that Jesus sent them. And they went. And maybe that's the point. We're just the workers. God is the Lord of the Harvest. We're called to be faithful where we are. And leave the rest to God.

**And that's the beauty of Matthew's snapshot of a scattered and sent church.**

Simon and Andrew, James and John, Thomas and Matthew, everyone of the disciples only knew the small actions they each took in this particular town, with this particular person. And they may have felt like they weren't doing much on their own. But when all those moments and encounters and small changes were added together, their impact was so much greater than if they had all stayed in the same place.

The picture of the church is not empty pews. Or an empty building.

The picture of the church, of this particular group of disciples, of Wilma and Carl, Steve and Michelle, Greg and John, Emelie and Eliot, Kim and Mike, Jordan and Julie, Heidi and LaVonne, Gary and Adrian, Dennis and Cheryl, Ann and Chris, Joshua and Connor, Henry and Evan, all of us sent out into our own towns and villages to look around us with compassion on those barely making it, on the harassed and helpless, and to be bringers of healing and hope in the name of Jesus.

May our eyes be opened to those around you who are barely making it.

May our hearts be moved to compassion just like Jesus.

And may the Lord of the harvest gather up all our efforts and actions and prayers - big and small - so that healing and hope may come to all our town and villages in the name of Jesus.

Amen.