

“Compassionate Eyes”

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

Bell Laboratories is a large research facility that was once owned by AT&T and engaged in studies of communications that guided the phone company in the development of products and services. One of their main research campuses is in Murray Hill, New Jersey, which is a short distance from my hometown. One of our neighbors was a researcher at Bell Labs, and one day he approached me with the offer of participating in one of their experiments. It was for one day and paid well, so I agreed and found myself in a room with several other people seated far apart from each other. We were all facing the same video screen and were instructed to watch the video and then answer a series of questions that would be given to us. The questions were very strange and didn’t seem to relate at all to the video, but I diligently filled out the survey and received my pay for the day. A few days later, I saw my neighbor and asked him about the study and what the questions had to do with the video we had watched. It turned out that the research wasn’t about the video itself but was focused on the reactions of the people in the room. Bell Labs researchers have found that people’s response to the same circumstance varies greatly depending on who they are and where they are located when they see the incident. While he hadn’t seen the results of our study, previous studies have found that the way a person sees something can result in very different interpretations of the same episode.

The research study in which I participated proves something that can be experienced in everyday life: the same scene can be seen and interpreted very differently by different people. When a car accident occurs, the police often look for eyewitnesses; and experienced has proved that eyewitness accounts of the same situation can be very different. Two people can go to a movie and depending on their preferences one may think it was great while the other person is very disappointed. I could attend a Blue Jays – Yankees game with several of my neighbors, but we would probably different responses to the outcome of the game depending on who won. The eyes through which each of us views the world can result in a very different view of the circumstances in which we live.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is continuing his ministry as he *“went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.”* (10:35). This follows Matthew’s report of Jesus healing several people that was met with the Pharisees’ false accusation that *“by the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons.”* (9:34). There is an obvious difference in the way Jesus and the Pharisees see the crowds and interpret the mission of Christ; while the Pharisees see Jesus’ healings as the work of Satan, those who have experienced his healing saw that it was proof that Jesus was truly *“the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* (16:16). Depending on how they looked upon these healings, they were either proof of Jesus’ divinity or proof that he was not the Son of God.

Those same two sets of eyes would also have looked upon the crowds very differently. These crowds were the people of Israel who were often misled and abused by their leaders, people who were looked down upon and dismissed as being of little worth to those who lusted for power and status. They were poor,

uneducated, and overlooked by those who looked for persons who could provide something for them, persons who had something to offer. They were people who “*were harassed, wounded and distraught under the dire rod of the shepherds, and lay prostrate upon the ground. Such was the condition of the people when Jesus came.*” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

But when Jesus looks at the crowds who have come into his presence, he sees them very differently: “*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” (9:36). The eyes through which Jesus views the crowd are *compassionate eyes*, eyes that see these people not as others might view them – for what they are or are not worth – but as people who are created in the image of God, loved by God, worthy of care and compassion because they are God’s beloved children. Through his compassionate eyes, Jesus sees the crowd as potential disciples who are being misled by their leaders, the unfaithful “shepherds” who have often betrayed the responsibility that had been entrusted to them to care for God’s people:

- “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled over them.” – Ezekiel 34:2-4.

Unlike these false and unfaithful shepherds, Jesus is the true shepherd who has compassion on this harassed and helpless flock. Jesus has compassion on Israel, not animosity, understanding that it is his vocation to be sent to them as the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy of a good shepherd who looks upon his people with compassion and always cares for them:

- “As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among the scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the LORD God.” – Ezekiel 34:12-15.

As Jesus looks upon the crowds through the compassionate eyes of a good and loving shepherd, he invites his disciples to share in this compassionate viewing of the people who are before them. Matthew does not report on how the disciples are viewing the crowds that have gathered around Jesus, but they are now commissioned to have this same viewpoint as they engage in the ministry into which Jesus commissions them when he announces that “*the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*” (9:37-38). As the authority to lead the people of Israel was transferred from Moses to Joshua as one “*who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd*” (Numbers 27:17), so also here Jesus confers authority on his disciples to be laborers in his “harvest,” a symbol for eschatological judgment found both in the Old Testament and elsewhere in Matthew:

- “On that day the LORD will thresh from the channel of the Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you will be gathered one by one, O people of Israel.” – Isaiah 27:12.

- “Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into the barn.” – Matthew 13:30.

The disciples’ mission is seen as an eschatological event. As such, it is God’s act, though involving human workers rather than angels as God’s agents. Thus, the disciples are instructed to pray for the “Lord of the harvest” to send out laborers into God’s harvest. The response of this prayer is the mission of the disciples (who are referred to as “apostles” in 10:2, persons who are “sent out” into the Lord’s harvest), who are represented as an expression of the divine compassion for the needy people of God and as participants in the Messiah’s work in Jesus’ call to *“follow me, and I will make you fish for people”* (4:19). *“The disciples’ mission is not voluntary activity initiated by them; rather, they are chosen, authorized, and sent by God through Christ.”* (M. Eugene Boring).

Jesus’ call to discipleship is followed by his bestowing upon them *“authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.”* (10:1). Jesus’ mission will continue in the work of the twelve apostles who are named (including *“Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him”*), who are given authority to speak and to act in Jesus name, to do the same deeds of power that Jesus has done in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of the one who *“took our infirmities and bore our diseases”* (8:17; Isaiah 53:4). As the disciples function with the authority of Jesus, the twelve are sent out by him with specific instructions, beginning with the same lost sheep of Israel who Jesus looked upon with compassionate eyes: *“Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* (10:5). Their mission is to proclaim the same message; to perform the same healings, even raising the dead; to live the same wandering, dependent life of poverty, and to anticipate the same mixed reaction.

- “Their mission is not one that they must work out on their own. Jesus gives specific instructions on where to go and whom to visit, on what to say and what to do. We are left with the distinct impression that the twelve are defined by their participation in the ongoing movement of the kingdom into the world.” – Colin Yuckman.

The disciples are sent to the *“lost sheep of the house of Israel,”* corresponding with the mission of Jesus in which *“Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”* (Romans 15:8-9). Jesus’ compassion is not restricted to the people of Israel, for it was through these children of Abraham that *“all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Genesis 12:3) so that after the Resurrection the disciples might continue his mission to *“make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (28:19) so that the Will of God proclaimed throughout the Old Testament might be accomplished:

- “As it is written, ‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises in your name’; and again he says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’; and again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him’; and again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.’” – Romans 15:9-12; Psalm 18:49, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1, Isaiah 11:10.

As the disciples are commissioned to continue the work of Jesus in making disciples of all nations, they are also called to engage in this ministry through the same compassionate lens through which Jesus looks upon

all people as beloved children of God. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, those who have been called by Christ into his ministry of reconciliation *“regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way”* (2 Corinthians 5:16).

- “From a human point of view everything looks hopeless, but Jesus sees things with different eyes. Instead of the people maltreated, wretched and poor, he sees the ripe harvest field of God. ‘The harvest is great.’ It is ripe enough to be gathered into the barns. The hour has come for these poor and wretched folks to be fetched home to the kingdom of God. Jesus beholds the promise of God descending on the multitudes where the scribes and zealots saw only a field trampled down, burnt and ravaged ... The harvest is great, but only Jesus in his mercy can see it.” – Bonhoeffer.

The call of Jesus to go forth and share his good news is one that continues to be issued to the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” that continues the work of the first disciples to *“proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9). Like these first apostles who were sent forth to shine the light of Christ’s love upon all nations, we are called to look upon all people through the same compassionate eyes with which our Lord viewed those who came to him. They were not a faceless crowd, people of little value, nameless masses who could be persecuted and ignored. Through the merciful eyes of Christ, they were precious children who were lost and lonely, the very people for whom God gave his only Son *“so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.”* (John 3:16).

- “When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus did not identify the person with the sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud.” – Helmut Thielicke.

When we are baptized into Christ Jesus, we are reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ. We are called to let the light of Christ shine before us so that others *“may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16), and we called to look upon those we are called to serve through the same compassionate eyes through which Jesus saw all people as precious and beloved children of God. Those who are called into the Lord’s harvest *“need ‘grace-healed eyes’ to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lovingly bestowed on us. ‘To love a person,’ said Dostoevsky, ‘means to see him as God intended him to be.’”* – Philip Yancey.

- “The cup of water given for you still holds the freshness of your grace; yet long these multitudes to view the strong compassion in your face.” – Frank M. North, ELW Hymn 719.

A few weeks after my visit to Bell Labs, I was walking by a neighborhood playground when I noticed a group of children in the far corner playing in a pile of dirt that had turned to mud after a recent rainstorm. They were covered head-to-toe in mud and were obviously having a great time; but the reaction of those who were watching them was quite different. Bystanders like myself were reacting with varying degrees of shock; you could almost read in their faces a sign of relief that at least these aren’t my children who will be tracking this mess into the house. But the reaction of their parents was very different: even though I’m

sure they weren't happy about the mess that they would have to clean up, they were looking at these dirty children through the eyes of parental love, thrilled that they were having a good time and thankful for these happy children they saw through all those layers of grime. Through their loving eyes, they didn't see dirty children; they saw the precious sons and daughters that they so dearly loved.

That how God sees us – through compassionate eyes that doesn't notice what other people might see, but only sees the children who God claimed as his own through Holy Baptism, the ones for whom our Saviour died, those who are always holy and precious in the eyes of God. As those who Christ continues to call into his harvest, we need to look upon others through those same compassionate eyes so that we might continue to reach out to all people with the love God has for all people our Lord continues to look upon through his steadfast, loving, compassionate eyes.

Amen.