

How Much Compassion Does it Take?

A sermon by Joe Hoffman

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

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Last week we had two folk join our church, Pat and LisaRose Barnes. Today, in just a bit, we will have two more, Jan Buchanan and Chris Nealis. It is always good to have new members. We are very grateful that our church continues to grow and be dynamic. But when someone wants to join the church, it does cause me to pause. I mean, it is tempting to only allow certain sorts of people to join the church. I'm not talking about gay or straight, or black or white. I am talking about folk that think like me, act like me, want the same things as me. If only that kind of person was allowed to join, well, it sure would make it easier. I can imagine – fantasize – that we would never have any disagreements. No arguments. The church would be more effective, more functional. No wasting time on trying to get a bunch of different minded folk to agree on something – anything!

I do want to say thank you – for all who came and participated with honesty and best intentions for this church – in last week's congregational conversation. There were a lot of feelings in the room. A good many questions. Misunderstandings and disagreements. All of that. And I want to say thank – to the Search Committee, who worked endless hours and gave forth a huge effort. I also thank them for not making the easiest decision, but rather making what they felt was the most faithful decision. And I want to say thanks to the Executive Board for guiding this process, and affirming the work of the Search Committee. And I also want to say thank you to all in the congregation. For being so honest last week. For sharing what you were thinking and feeling. I think we were practicing at being church in the real world. We still need to practice some more. Need to do a better job of helping all of us know our church structure and system better. Know our history better. Know our constitution and bylaws better. But for now, I want to say thank you. I deeply appreciate that we can be the kind of church in which such honesty can be expressed.

I have never known a church – never known of a church – that didn't have a lot of differences to work through. Sometimes it is the churches in which the

members all look alike and talk alike and come from the same socio-economic class that has the most differences – and that won't engage those differences to find a blessing. It is too bad. For being the church does not and never has meant thinking alike or being the same. When I read the letters of Paul to the early church, I am amazed that the church survived the first 10 years. So much conflict. So many issues that separated folk.

The story from the gospel reading today says that Jesus had 12 disciples. It is interesting, that number, because no two gospels name the same twelve disciples or even focus much on the number. My guess is that someone chose the number 12 because they wanted to connect to the 12 tribes of Israel. But among the disciples, how many ever there were, at least 4 were problematic. Judas was a betrayer, the worst kind of disciple to have. The one who loses trust and turns Jesus in. Then there was Simon, not Simon Peter, but Simon the zealot, who was part of some group that was trying to overthrow the Roman occupation – with force if necessary. And there was Matthew, a tax collector, a hireling of Rome, collecting taxes for Rome. Jesus probably had to sit between Simon and Matthew! And finally there was Simon Peter, who later denied Jesus.

So we don't have the perfect community here. We don't have a group that sees things the same. We don't have the same vision for following Jesus. We just have a group of people who have found the ways of Jesus to be so compelling as to put aside whatever else they were doing with life and to follow him.

I think that's what it means to be the church. And what we trust in, what we hope for, is that in this new community that we become, we are able to embrace and transcend the tensions within us from our former communities of loyalty. But it isn't easy.

To be the church, we are called to love each other where we are. To have compassion with one another. Jesus did not stop the disciples from being themselves. He knew who they were. He knew there would be trouble from time to time. But he welcomed any and all who were drawn to live in the spirit that he taught.

Wouldn't it be great if the church could all be Democrats? Except they sure have had trouble making up their minds on a presidential candidate. Or maybe you

prefer Republicans? Wouldn't it be great if everyone parented in the same way. If everyone felt the same about what we should do, how we should organize ourselves. Wouldn't that be great. But that is not what it means to be the church.

Jesus called together those who were willing to follow, and he pointed at the crowds – people of all kinds, and often people who were marginalized, had been harassed, or bullied. And he said – look at the crowds. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Jesus turned to the disciples then and said – you do the work. These people are like sheep without a shepherd. You go out and show compassion to them. Don't wait until you are better trained, until you have more money, until you have more staff. Go and show compassion.

Those who follow Jesus are to show compassion to others.

When I was young, my dad used to spend some time with us throwing the ball in the side yard. It would be me, my brother, and my sister. There were a lot of kids in the neighborhood, and they would see what we were doing, and pretty soon several were watching us play from the sides. And my dad would say, come on and join us. And then there were 8-9 of us playing, and others coming.

I remember though, that I didn't want dad to invite everyone. When Jimmy came, I would say to myself – Dad, please don't invite him to play. He's not very good. He's not like us. No one really likes him. But my dad never wavered – Hey Jimmy, you want to play? Everyone was invited. Everyone came just as they were.

Jesus called a group of followers that he could teach, that were willing to grow in their understanding and knowledge. And Jesus called these twelve to have compassion – with each other, zealot and tax collector, and with those who were broken by the hardships of life. It was not about agreeing. It was about following and allowing God to show us all a way.

How much compassion should we show. How much is enough? Well, once someone asked Jesus how many times we should forgive – as many as 7 times? And Jesus said – 70 times 7. I'll let you figure it out from there.

There's another story of a father who had two sons. And one son got tired of being at home, and said – Hey dad, give me my inheritance so I can go find my life. And the father did. And the son lived the high life as long as the money lasted.

Then he felt the pain of hunger. He realized what it was like to be poor. And finally, he came to his senses and said – I am going home and ask my father to take me back as a servant.

What he didn't know is that his father had been watching for him every day since he left. Hoping and praying he would come home again. And when he saw him coming, he had compassion. He had the servants bring a new robe, they threw a feast – because the one who had been lost had been found.

And you remember the story Jesus told of the traveler who was beaten and robbed, and left to die by the side of the road. Two religious leaders saw him and passed him by. But a third person, a Samaritan, saw him and had what? Compassion, that's right. Bound his wounds, took him to a place to stay and get well, paid the bill.

How much compassion does it take to be the church?

The story is told that after Jesus and all the disciples had died, they gathered in heaven for a meal – much as they had done over and over on Earth. Some of the disciples were getting things ready, and when all was ready, they called out to Jesus and asked him to come. He was standing, looking into the distance. He did not come, so Peter went over and said – Jesus, why is it you don't come? The meal is ready. And do you remember what Jesus said? Do you remember? He said, You go ahead and start if you want. I'm waiting for Judas.

How many times should we show compassion? How much compassion does it take to be the church? What do you think? ... Yes, I think you are exactly right.