

Texts: Matthew 9:35-10:8, Romans 5:1-8

It's a changing world that Matthew describes. Current reality gets reshuffled by the impact of the first word of the first verse Elizabeth read: Jesus. "Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages." I like to travel, many of us like to travel, take in new settings, experience different cultures, taste new cuisines; step out into the different. Jesus stepped out and made his travel stops different. He taught in their synagogues, announced the good news of the kingdom, and healed every disease and every sickness. That's way different.

"When Jesus saw the crowds", Matthew goes on. At a time when we look at crowds differently. As we learn new habits for sizing up strangers, and getting a feel for a large group of people. As we check for nearest escape routes, because we just can't be so sure anymore. When we are regularly reminded that public places, parks, parking lots, baseball fields are not guaranteed to be free from danger. When **we** see a crowd...

"When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Isn't it still so true? But contrary to our recent learning to hold back and exercise caution, Jesus had compassion on them. Even though they were troubled and helpless. **Because** they were troubled and helpless. I believe the compassion offered by our Stephen Ministers is a profound act of Jesus in this church. For people who are precious and precarious.

"The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine." We can't even imagine how big the harvest is. Jesus basically says: "Don't even try imagining", doesn't he? Too much, too large, we can only consider a smaller field, within narrow limits. Just enough to get by. Enough to keep it going. Enough to keep our heads above water. Nothing earth-shaking. I'm glad to hear that Jesus is low on volunteers, too; he knows what that's like. "Plead with the Lord to send out more workers for the harvest."

He's got twelve; Matthew names them. Judas, the betrayer, is with him. Two men at polar opposites, politically, are with him. Matthew, the tax collector, immersed in the corrupt Roman system and Simon the Cananaen, or Zealot, advocating for the overthrow of that same system. It was a purple 12 man band, plus Jesus. Churches like ours, where there are both red and blue people, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, I'm told, are purple churches. Purpleness doesn't seem to deter Jesus, fortunately. I haven't found purpleness deterring Jesus around here either.

"He gave them authority over unclean spirits to throw them out and to heal every disease and every sickness." They are empowered to travel and make their stopping points way different. Verse 8 is a real topper, as Jesus instructed the twelve, and as we listen in for what applies to us: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and throw out demons. You received without having to pay. Therefore, give without demanding payment." Hard to imagine this harvest. From a purple group, numbering twelve.

The famous preacher, Fred Craddock, often used imaginative images in his sermons. He told how he was outside, one day, working in his yard, when he saw an unusually large sparrow walking down the street. The sparrow weighed about nine pounds. A big sparrow body, with normal sparrow wings, which looked miniscule on the overweight bird. Fred asked the sparrow, "Aren't you a little heavy?" The sparrow said, "Yeah, that's why I'm out walking, trying to get some of this weight off." Fred said, "Why don't you fly?" The sparrow stopped and looked at Fred like he was crazy: "Fly? I've never flown before. I might get hurt!" Fred asked, "What's your name?" The bird said, "Church."

"Jesus gave authority over unclean spirits to throw them out and to heal every disease and every sickness." Heal the sick, raise the dead, give to others as freely as you have received. I believe the compassion given freely by our Stephen Ministers is a profound act of Jesus in this church.

Paul assures us that we have all been made righteous, our record is clean, because our faith is joined with Jesus' faithfulness. And we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: peace takes flight. We have continual, open access to grace, and if we can boast about one thing, every day, it is the secure hope which elevates us to God's glory. Specifically, Paul adds, we prepare for departure when we have problems, and when we have troubles. The same one who saw the crowd, troubled and helpless, and had compassion on them, our Lord, stops by and prepares for our departure. With these fully-functioning wings of faith, we are not afraid. We launch: from trouble to endurance, from endurance to character, from character to hope. We soar to unimaginable heights, because God has shown his great love for us; while we were sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus rose, and so shall we, in sickness and disease, in trouble, even in death.

We've marveled, as Stephen Ministers and Stephen Leaders, at how we, flawed, imperfect, all too human, red, blue, purple followers of Jesus have been empowered with compassion for persons going through trouble and challenges. We've seen the wonders of what an hour or so of one-on-one conversations, with love and attention, with prayer and faith, can do. We're learning the impact of the one who travels to meet us where we are: his name is Jesus. We become way different. Trouble brings endurance. Endurance builds character. Character produces hope. So, we **are** able to fly.