

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 11
June 15, 2008

Exodus 19:2-8a
Psalm 100
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8 [9-23]

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Their primary concern was membership. Specifically, their concern was that membership needed to be rising as opposed to declining. Well, to be honest, it was either the number of members, or the dollar amount of their pledges. The two of those were equally important. After all, it would sure look good to see more and more people involved. Plus, the bills had to be paid, and the new building needed to be funded.

Even though their mission statement was centered on the concept of “service”, a better mission statement could be summed up in one word: “numbers.” And so they carefully devised plans to attract more people that would eventually bring in more money.

They specifically targeted the young families in the community. They offered state of the art nursery care. They offered numerous children’s programs. They also opened up their building for community groups such as rotary clubs, support groups, scout troops, just to name a few.

And boy could they cook! One of their biggest events was their Easter brunch! They provided everything from roasted leg of lamb, to roasted marshmallows for the kids. Some people resented having to work so hard on the day that celebrated the resurrection of Jesus.

But they figured that if first time visitors could get a chance to have a great meal and experience their wonderful hospitality, it was considered “well worth it.” If we can just get them in the door, (so they thought), they’ll practically line up to be new members!

The name of the church you ask? Who said I was talking about a church? Actually, I’m describing a country club that a colleague used to work for while he was in college.

Don’t get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with country clubs. I would guess that a good number of you here this morning belong to one.

But I do have a serious problem when churches all over America confuse Christian discipleship with what I call the “membership mentality.”

The “membership mentality” focuses on “what I get out of it.” It means “paying your dues” in return for “services provided.” It gives you status in the community, and a sense of self worth. It offers programs that will support and enhance your current lifestyle.

However, it has nothing to do with being a disciple of Jesus. For Jesus said, if you follow me, you will have no place to rest your head. You will be beaten and persecuted. Your family will turn against you. You will be hated and despised. Wow! a mission statement like that probably will not attract very many members.

Or at least we would think. But as we know, that when those were the consequences of becoming a member of the Jesus movement, it grew like crazy.

So how is it that we break out of this “membership mentality” and be truer to the Biblical perspective on Christian discipleship? First of all, I submit that we must first radically redefine what the “members” model would call “the target demographic”.

It’s interesting how many of the huge “mega-churches” in the United States have developed a “target market”. The problem is; most of their “target markets” are all the same. Saddleback Church in southern California is one example.

In his best selling book; *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren, the Senior Pastor at Saddleback, writes about their “target market”. He writes: “Our Target: Saddleback Sam. He is well educated. He likes his job. He likes where he lives. Health and fitness are high priorities for him and his family.

He’d rather be in a large group than a small one. He is skeptical of ‘organized’ religion. He likes contemporary music. He thinks he is enjoying life more than he did five years ago. He is self-satisfied, even smug, about his station in life. He prefers the casual and informal, over the formal. He is overextended in both time and money.”

Now don’t get me wrong, there are many people in this country who fit into this category that need to hear the Gospel. No doubt we have some right here in our congregation. However, perhaps we need to look at humanity the way Jesus did.

The people Jesus wants are not “numbers”. They are not “possible pledges”. They are not “prospective members”. They are not strong, independent, happy people doing fine. Rather, Jesus seeks those who are outcasts – those who have nothing to offer.

In our Gospel story today, there is one word that describes the reaction Jesus had to those he encountered along the way – compassion. Verse 36 reads; “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Now how many of you have ever been on a roller coaster? You know that feeling you get in your stomach when you are going down the first drop of a roller coaster? It’s the same feeling that you get when you hear terrible news – that phone call in the middle of the night, or the police officer walking up to your door. You feel like someone has just kicked you in the stomach. The New Testament has a Greek word for that feeling; it is “*Splagchna*.” It literally means bowels or guts, but is translated “compassion.”

This is the word that describes how Jesus felt when he encountered the sick, the blind, the demon possessed, those who had lost loved ones, the hungry, the lonely, the bewildered the harassed, and the helpless.

Our word “compassion” comes from two Latin words; (*com & pati*)’ which literally means “suffering with” others.

During his time on earth, Jesus was the embodiment of God’s compassion. Scripture frequently says; Jesus was “moved with compassion” by the suffering of people. And if that was the case in the first century, what great grief there must be in our Lord’s heart today.

Now I would guess that most Christians living today would like to think that, like Jesus, we are moved with compassion. When we read the newspaper, we feel that we are moved with compassion. When we listen to the radio talk shows describing the atrocities going on in our world, we too are moved with compassion. When we watch the news on television and see the intense human suffering, we feel compassion.

We say; “how awful, how tragic, how sad! What is our world coming to? But compassion is not just pity or sympathy. It is more than being moved to tears or stirred up emotionally. It is more than just speaking out about the evil and suffering in the world. If I wanted to, I could probably stand up here all day and tell you stories that would make you cry.

But compassion means pity and mercy accompanied by a desire to help change things. True compassion leads us to action. True compassion moves us to actually do something! For if we see all of these things but do not act, then it is mere shallow sentiment. It is not what Jesus has called us for.

Phillip Yancey tells the story of Dr. Paul Brand who has devoted his life to treating leprosy patients in India. In the course of one examination, Brand laid his hand on the patient's shoulder and informed him through a translator of the treatment that lay ahead. To his surprise the man began to shake, and then broke down in tears.

"Have I said something wrong?" Brand asked the translator. The translator quizzed the patient and replied; "No doctor; he says that he is crying because you put your hand around his shoulder. Until he came here, no one had even touched him for many years."

Mother Teresa has said, "We have drugs for people with diseases like leprosy. But these drugs do not treat the main problem, the disease of being unwanted. That's what my sisters hope to provide. The sick and poor suffer even more from rejection than material want. Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty."

You see, our life in Christ all boils down to compassion. It was compassion that led Moses to say; "That's it! I'm not gonna just stand here and let Pharaoh beat down my people." It was compassion that led the Good Samaritan to say, "I'm not gonna just walk by and watch this guy bleed to death!" It was compassion that led Don and Rose Ann Benner to say, "We're not gonna just sit here and leave orphans homeless in El Salvador! Let's get down there and build an orphanage!"

So how does compassion become action? Well, Scripture does not say that Jesus came up with an array of activity programs to lure in the seekers in a non-threatening and affirming environment. Jesus didn't start with glossy brochures and a snazzy marketing program.

In order to inspire his disciples, he gave them an illustration: "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

Now I will be the first to admit that I know practically nothing about farming. I grew up in the city. But I do know this: Harvest time is the biggest event of the year.

It's when the fate of the whole farm is at stake. You're either ready for it or your not. You either have enough labor to take in all the crops or you do not. And if you aren't ready for the harvest when it comes, you may have ruined all hope for the year.

For I can imagine that there is nothing worse that watching all that you have worked for spoil and rot in the fields. I would guess that the word compassion might be appropriate here. Failing to reap the harvest would be like having your stomach kicked in.

Brothers and sisters, the harvest is plentiful. We are the laborers. The author and speaker Tony Campolo stood in front of a group of Harvard MBA's and said; "Anybody can get a great job at IBM and be a success. How many of you can go to Haiti and start a cooperative bakery among the poor?" Six of them went, and their summer will change the lives of hundreds. And their lives will never be the same either.

Being a part of Christ's Church is not being a member of a club. It is not driven by membership and pledges. It is driven by compassion for others. It is being part of a community that is claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. And it is that compassion that lives in each of us. It is through that compassion that God can change the world if we open ourselves to the suffering around us. For indeed, the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.