

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 14, 2010**

A HEART FOR LOST PEOPLE

Matthew 9:35-38

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

If you remember anything at all from last Sunday's message, I hope it is that Jesus was (and is) passionate about people, and that He showed us the compassionate heart of God. Jesus did not suffer from EDD. There was no empathy deficit disorder in His life. He was filled with compassion for hurting, needy people. Not only does Jesus *suffer with* us in the hard places and hard things we experience in life (which is what the word *compassion* means), but He also *suffered for* us when He took our sins upon Himself and gave up His life for us on the cross, so that we might be forgiven and made right with God through faith in Him.

Bottom line: Jesus had a caring, compassionate heart. In fact, we could say He was compassion incarnate. His compassion is in focus in our Scripture reading today from Matthew 9. Let's turn to Matthew 9:35-38 and give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word.

PREOCCUPIED WITH PEOPLE

Jesus was preoccupied with people. Being preoccupied with something can be a bad thing. You can be preoccupied or obsessed with the wrong things. You can be preoccupied with something in an unhealthy way, in a way that can damage you personally. Or your relationships. Or both.

But Jesus' preoccupation with people was anything but bad. It was a good thing for us, because it led to our salvation. Because of His preoccupation with us in love, Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves in His saving work for us on the cross. He did for us what only He could do. No one else could do it, because no one else was qualified. No one else met the requirements for the job. No one else could do what needed to be done to save us from our sins and give us eternal life in the kingdom of God.

Praise God that Jesus was preoccupied with people! In the days of His incarnation, people were always on Jesus' mind. And we still are.

You may ask: What kind of people does Jesus care about? What kind of people are constantly on His mind? People who are sick or suffering. People who are in pain. People who are lonely. People who are overwhelmed with grief. People who are discouraged or depressed. People who are disillusioned with life and feel hopeless. People who are just drifting through life with no clear purpose or direction. People who are searching for truth. People who are facing problems bigger than they are, and they don't know where to turn to find the help they need. People who have everything they have ever wanted, but still feel empty on the inside. People who have gotten themselves tangled up in destructive habits and

dead-end relationships. People who have messed up royally and are paying a price for it. People who have come to the end of their rope. People who know they are sinners who desperately need a Savior. In short, Jesus is preoccupied with us. All of us.

In His preoccupation with people, it says in verse 35 that Jesus traveled through all the villages and towns of Galilee. He didn't simply wait for people to come to Him. He went where they were. He taught them the truth of God's Word and how to apply it to their lives. He spoke the gospel to them. He told the good news of the kingdom of God and how to become a part of it. He healed their diseases and sicknesses. He ministered to the needs of their bodies and their hearts.

Verse 36 says explicitly that Jesus had compassion for the crowds who came to Him. Why? Because "they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus knew what life was like for them. They were bullied and pushed around by teachers who demanded that they measure up to an impossible moral and spiritual standard. They were fed lies by false teachers who were out to make a buck and a name for themselves. They were intimidated by irreligious people or skeptics who asked them questions they couldn't answer. They were unable to distinguish between truth and error. They were discouraged by their repeated moral failings and by their inability to have peace with God. Just like people today.

They were like sheep without a shepherd. You don't have to be an expert in sheep-herding to know that it is not good for sheep to be without a shepherd. What can happen to sheep without a shepherd? They can get lost. They can go astray. They can wander into danger. They can get attacked and eaten by a predator. They can starve. Lots of bad things can happen to sheep without a shepherd, because sheep are incapable of protecting and providing for themselves.

Jesus, however, came to be the Shepherd of the sheep. He is the good shepherd, He says in John 10:11-15, who cares so much for the sheep that He would willingly lay down His life for them. It is the nature of sheep that they desperately need a shepherd. And Jesus, in His compassion for us, in His preoccupation with us, is the Shepherd we need.

It says in verse 36 that Jesus "saw the crowds." I think He didn't just see the crowd. I think He didn't just see a mass of humanity. I think when He looked at the crowds, Jesus saw individuals, too. I think He saw particular people – real individuals with real names like Rob and Rachel and Dan and Debbie and Lloyd and Lisa – and real problems, real questions, and real needs.

Jesus knew their greatest need in life was to know God in a personal way as their loving heavenly Father. He knew that what they needed most was to have their sins forgiven, which only God could do. They needed to be made right with God. They needed to experience God's amazing grace and mind-boggling peace. They needed to be reconciled to God through faith in Him as the Son of God and Savior of sinners. Jesus knew it was what they needed most. It is what everyone needs most, including you and me.

Jesus knew they were spiritually lost. And He had a heart for lost people. He had a heart for people who were far from God. Just as He was filled with compassion for the leper who came running to Him and asked Jesus to make him clean, as we saw last Sunday in Mark 1, Jesus was filled with compassion for people who didn't know God and were, consequently, missing out on real life.

WHY LOST PEOPLE MATTER

Why do people who are spiritually lost matter so much to Jesus? Why are they so important to Him? And why should they matter to us? There are at least three reasons.

First, because it is the reason Jesus came. In His encounter with Zaccheus, He said the reason He had come was to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). He did not come to earth to live an easy life. He did not come to be served, He said, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). The reason Jesus came into the world, says Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, was to save sinners. He came to redeem people who are far from God and to restore them to a right relationship with God through His saving work on the cross.

They are the reason Jesus came. *We* are the reason. Because we are all lost without Him.

The second reason lost people matter so much to Jesus is because of the greatness of God's love for sinners. It is because of the incomparable greatness of God's love for sinners like us. For sinners *including* us.

John 3:16 tells us that God loved the world so much that He gave His Son – His one and only Son – that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. Why did God send His Son into the world? Why did Jesus go to the cross? Because of His love for us. It says in John 3:17 that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world to hell, but to save the world through Him. Because of His love for us. Because of His love for a world full of sinners like us who are lost without Him.

There is a world full of people all around us who need to know that God loves them. The need to know that He cares about them. They need to know that they are important to Him. They need to know how God has expressed His love for them in the incarnation, life, suffering, death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. It is a love like no other. And it is available to everyone who will receive it.

The third reason why lost people matter so much is because of something we don't like to think about – the reality of hell. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13-14) that ultimately, there are only two roads you can travel in life. There is the broad way, the wide road that leads to perdition, and there are a lot of travelers on this highway. There is also the narrow road, which is the way of repentance and trust in the Lord Jesus. It is the way of willing and joyful surrender to the sovereign and gracious rule of God. This road, Jesus said, is not nearly so popular as the other.

Only two roads. Only two destinies. One road leads to the destruction of our souls. The other leads to life. Eternal life. One road leads to heaven. The other leads to hell.

In his book *Honest to God?*, Bill Hybels makes the discomforting but true statement that “hell is real, and real people go there for eternity.” We don’t like to think about hell. But it is real. Hybels writes: “The reality of hell was a major theme in Jesus’ (preaching and teaching). Jesus grieved over the rich young ruler because he was walking the road to hell. He wept over the people of Jerusalem because He saw them as sheep without a Shepherd; it was only a matter of time before they would wander off the cliffs of eternity and into the abyss of hell. He narrated incidents like Lazarus and the rich man, which plainly told of the agony, and the desperation, of those forever separated from God. Jesus confronted the Pharisees, the scribes, the tax-gatherers, the politicians, the rich, the poor – anybody and everybody – with the hard truth: Unless they repented and put their faith in Him, they would die in their sins and face eternal condemnation” (pp. 122-123).

It *is* a hard truth. It *is* an uncomfortable truth. But Jesus made it clear that hell is real, and without Him that is where people are headed.

MADE FOR A MISSION

Let’s face it: You and I were made for a mission. God has a mission for your life and mine. And He has a mission for us together, a mission for His church. One essential part of our mission is “to share the saving love of Jesus with our neighbors.” That is what it says in our church’s mission statement. God has put us here to share His saving love with people all around us who do not know Him and are spiritually lost without Him.

Made for a mission. To put it another way, we were made to be messengers. We were made to be messengers of the greatest message ever given, the message of the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes it (Romans 1:16). Together as the church, and as individual followers of Christ, we have a message to communicate to a world which is lost without Christ.

To say it another way, we were made to be witnesses empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) to share with others by the words we speak and the lives we live how knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord has made a difference in our lives, and how He can change theirs, too.

We were made for a mission. A mission from God. We were made to be messengers of the most important message ever given. We were made to be witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ and the life-changing truth and power of the gospel.

To say it yet another way, we were made to be Christ’s ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), speaking on behalf of our Savior as His appointed representatives, to urge people to receive His forgiving love and saving grace, and to be reconciled to God. In the verses immediately preceding (2 Corinthians 5:18-19), Paul says to us who are followers of Christ that God “reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men’s (our) sins against them

(us). And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” As Christ’s ambassadors, both the ministry of reconciliation and the message of reconciliation have been handed over to us. That is an awesome responsibility.

There has been a lot of talk in Washington recently about “reconciliation” as a kind of political process or maneuver to be employed to get health care reform legislation through the Congress. What has struck me is how divisive this kind of “reconciliation” seems to be. It has not brought Democrats and Republicans together. It has not broken down walls of division. In fact, it seems to have deepened the divide. Does it seem that way to you?

The ministry of reconciliation God has entrusted to us is different. It breaks down barriers. It restores us to a right relationship with God. Because we ourselves have been reconciled to God through faith in Christ, we have the privilege of inviting and encouraging others to be reconciled to God.

THE GREATEST GIFT

In his book *Just Walk Across the Room*, Bill Hybels says that the single greatest gift any of us can ever give another person is an introduction to the God whose Son went the unthinkable distance and willingly gave up His life to redeem us (p. 29).

Would you like to share this gift with someone who is spiritually lost? Would you like God to use you, just as you are, to introduce another person to the Savior? I believe God wants to use you and me, each one of us, for just this purpose.

Back in Matthew 9, in verse 37, Jesus says: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” The harvest Jesus is talking about here isn’t wheat or any agricultural crop. He is talking about people. Lost people. People who don’t know God. The harvest, He says, is bountiful. It is huge. But there aren’t enough workers to bring it all in.

So, what does Jesus tell His disciples to do? He tells them to pray. In verse 38 He says: “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out (more) workers into His harvest field.”

The Lord Jesus wants us to pray this prayer as well. I believe He wants us to join with other believers around the world in praying for more workers, more messengers, more witnesses, more ambassadors, more missionaries to be raised up to go out here at home and throughout the world to introduce lost people to the Savior. Will you make this a regular part of your prayers?

Prayer is the engine that powers the ministry of evangelism, as we call upon God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to draw people to Himself in faith. And prayer is something every one of us can do. You are never too old to pray for the salvation of unbelievers, and for God to send more workers into the fields of the world.

But I think there is more that the Lord Jesus wants us to do. He doesn’t just want us to pray for more workers. I believe He wants us to go into the world, into *our* world, to introduce lost

people to the Savior who loves them so much He died for them. He wants to send us out like a search and rescue team to find and rescue people who are headed for eternity without Him.

Two weeks ago we looked at Colossians 4:2, where Paul tells us to devote ourselves to prayer. In the verses that follow (3-6), he asks the church in Colosse to pray for him and his ministry team, because they want to make Christ known to people who don't know Him. He asks them to pray for open doors for the gospel message to impact people's lives.

You and I can pray that God will open doors for us in relationships and interactions we have with unbelievers. And when God opens a door for us, when He presents us with an open door, what should we do? Walk through it.

There is always a risk involved when you walk through an open door to talk with someone about grace or to point someone to the Savior. When you walk through the open door, you enter what Hybels calls "the zone of the unknown." It is unknown because you don't know how the other person will respond or how the conversation will turn out. But you do know – you can have the assurance – that God is sovereign in all of our encounters. And He is able, more than able, to use fallible vessels like us to bring spiritually lost people to new life in Him.

So, by all means, pray. And keep on praying. Like Paul, we can pray that we will make the message as plain as day to those who don't yet know Christ (see Colossians 4:4, *The Message*). But then we've got to communicate the message. We've got to walk through the open doors and actually tell other people about Jesus.

You may agree with what I've said today, but you feel inadequate when it comes to actually doing it. I understand, because I feel inadequate, too. In fact, the Bible says that we *are* inadequate in ourselves. Paul expresses it this way in 2 Corinthians 3:5-6: "not that we are competent in ourselves – but our competence comes from God, who has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant." This new covenant is the covenant of God's amazing grace in Christ, by which we have been saved and in which we now stand.

We are not adequate. We are not competent in ourselves. But God is. He is able, and He makes us competent for His service.

As first steps, here are two ways you can let God use you to reach lost people: First, you can take advantage of opportunities to receive training in how to share the gospel message with others. Pastor Bob is currently in the midst of a 13-week class, training several members of our church family to use tools from Evangelism Explosion in sharing the message of the gospel with people who don't yet know Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives, or who aren't sure where they stand with God.

Look for opportunities like this to be better equipped to be used by God. And make the most of them.

Second, I simply want to ask each of you to think of an unchurched person you know – it might be a friend, it could be a neighbor, maybe it is someone in your family or someone with whom you work – someone who is not a believer, as far as you know. Invite that person, or couple, or family to come to church with you. Even better, *bring* them to church with you some Sunday between now and Easter. Easter is just three weeks from now (Sunday, April 4). Two weeks from today, on Palm Sunday, the Choir will present its Easter musical. Maybe you know someone who might be particularly drawn to the music and its message.

Bring them to church with you some Sunday, and then take them out to brunch or lunch afterwards to talk about their experience. Maybe God will give you an opportunity to share your faith in some way, or to point them to Jesus. Or maybe it will just be one step in a process God Himself is orchestrating to bring them to Himself.

Will you do that? Will you take a step of faith and let God use you? Jesus cares passionately about people who are spiritually lost. He wants us to have a heart for the lost, too.

AN INVITATION

One last thing. I want to ask you all to bow your head and close your eyes for a moment. Will you do that right now? As I have talked today about people who are spiritually lost and how God wants to use us to introduce them to Him, some of you may have come to the realization that you don't really know God and you have never embraced Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Maybe you have come to the realization that you need to be reconciled to God.

If this is true in your life, I have good news for you. The Lord Jesus invites you to come to Him today. He wants you to come to Him today, just as you are, admitting that you are a sinner who needs a Savior, and putting your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, who took your sins upon Himself when He gave His life for us on the cross. God's saving grace is both available and sufficient for you.

Will you come to Him today and receive the gift of eternal life He gives to all who turn to Him in faith? If that is the desire of your heart, if you desire to have your sins forgiven and to receive the gift of salvation through faith in Christ, would you say so by simply raising your hand while everyone's eyes are closed? Raise your hand right now if this is the desire of your heart.

Jesus said that He will never turn away anyone who comes to Him in trusting faith (John 7:37). You can count on Jesus to be true to His Word. With your heads still bowed and your eyes closed, will you join me in prayer?