



February 19, 2017
Larry Hackman
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

in•ter•cede: Missionaries

Matthew 9:35-38

Have you guys noticed anything different about me lately? It's not my haircut. I'm wearing what is traditionally worn by the Karen people of Burma. I bought these clothes, not to make a fashion statement, but as a poignant reminder of my experiences there. Not just to remember my experiences, but to remember the people I met. One person, in particular, is a man named Samsuk. Samsuk is the pastor of the church that we held our pastoral training at. He's the guy who was running the whole training, actually. When we first met him, we bonded over the fact that he too has a young baby boy. Samsuk wore this same kind of pink skirt the whole time we were visiting. I knew I had to get one myself. It fascinated me that the men over there in that jungle wear skirts! They think nothing of it! But I wanted to wear this today to remind us as a church that the world is a big place, and our normal is not everybody's normal.

We've been talking about praying for others, interceding. I think for most of us it makes sense that we would pray for our marriages, for our children, for our cities, for our country. These are all things that directly, perhaps even daily, affect our lives. Of course we pray about them. I hope it makes sense that we pray for the people we know and love to know Jesus, as Ellis shared about this past week. But maybe praying for missionaries can be something that's a little off some of our radars. It's hard to get our brains wrapped around what missionary work is, what it looks like. As alien and strange as my clothing is today, missionary work can seem that hard to grasp and imagine. Out of sight, out of mind, as they say. I don't say that to make anybody guilty, it's just the fact of how our lives work. We pay the most attention to what's in front of us, what is immediate.

Today, I want to put missionaries right in front of you. I hope to get you excited about the work that God is doing around the world, extraordinary work through ordinary people. And I want to do that through a little passage in Matthew 9.

Here in Matthew, Jesus is relatively along in his ministry. Since he finished Jesus' world famous Sermon on the Mount two chapters previously, Matthew mostly records a series of encounters with individuals, a few sayings, and lots of healings. Matthew has not yet recorded Jesus calling his 12 disciples. In fact, that happens immediately after this passage. But here, between the calling of his disciples and the recording of these miracles, the Gospel has what seems like an interlude. A break in the action, a view of what's happening from 10,000 feet. Let's listen in here in Matthew 9:35-38

“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Did you know God is on a mission? If you were here when we read through The Story this past year, you should know that. **God’s mission is to reconcile the world to himself.** So long ago, our ancestors rejected God and left for us a legacy of brokenness and death, there in the Garden of Eden. Our world is not whole, it is broken and in need of deep healing. But God has a mission. From early on he tells Abraham, I will make you a nation, and through your seed I will bless the whole world. The Story of the Old Testament is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, in part. Out of Abraham comes the nation of Israel, and out of the nation of Israel comes the One who will bring healing and reconciliation to the whole world: Jesus.

Here in Matthew we find Jesus, in the midst of the mission of God. The kingdom of God is growing! Wherever he goes, he is teaching them about who God is, he is bringing healing and wholeness, he is telling them Good News, the gospel! Notice that the mission of God, this reconciliation, is not just about changing the way people think. It’s about introducing into their whole lives healing, health, wholeness.

When we talk about missions, this is what we’re getting at. **“Missions” comes from the mission of God. It is people actively engaged in the work of reconciling our world with God in cultures other than our own.** What does that look like? The same things Jesus did: teaching, gospel, healing. That is why some of our missions work is medical work. Some of it is education and training. All of it is evangelism-- bringing good news that impacts what people believe about God and bringing their whole lives healing, health, and wholeness. All of that is work that follows in the footsteps of Jesus, the work of reconciliation, the mission of God to bring wholeness in all areas of our lives in and through himself. We are all called to be ones who follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to be a part of the mission of God! But some are called to do that work in a culture or place that is not their own. These people are called missionaries.

When we look at the first part of this passage in Matthew, we can get to understanding what missions is. But I want to do more than that, I want to know why it was so compelling to Jesus, and to his Father. I want to know the heart of Jesus and the Father. This same heart is what beats in missionaries today. If we can see through that lens, I think it better prepares us to pray for missionaries.

What is the heart of Jesus in this? In this passage we two things: compassion and urgency. And we see these two things illustrated by two different metaphors, the lost sheep and the plentiful harvest.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus sees the crowds he feels compassion for them, because they are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. This seems simple enough on the face of it, but there’s really more to this picture. Who is the great shepherd who feeds his sheep? Jesus! In fact, these are the words Jesus uses to describe himself in John 10:14-16.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

As Jesus' eyes look over the crowds and he feels compassion for them, he recognizes that his flock is so much greater than anyone imagined. Who are the other sheep? Remember, God told Abraham that his seed would bless the whole world. The other sheep are the whole world, not just the people of Israel. Jesus doesn't see a whole bunch of different people, Israel and Gentiles, nations, he sees one flock, one shepherd. Jesus has in mind the whole world, reconciled to him. No longer lost, no longer vulnerable, but cared for by the Good Shepherd as one people.

John helps us flesh out what's going on in Matthew as he looks out on the crowd. Jesus does not only look out on the crowds, he looks out on the whole world and sees faces. He looks at them one by one, and he says, "These are sheep not of this fold. I MUST bring them also. They will listen to my voice." Some of these faces are old, some young. Some of them strange, some more familiar. Some frightening, some comforting. But when Jesus looks at them, he feels only compassion. He sees their pain. He sees their need for a Good Shepherd. And it does not frighten him, does not wear him down. Because he loves them.

If we are to pray for our missionaries, I think we need to enter into this place of compassion with Jesus. Too often, we do not see the faces of our world. We see only danger, strangeness, otherness. But Jesus sees lost sheep, who need a shepherd. This week, when you come to your knees for our missionaries, will you see these faces too? Maybe you don't have that kind of compassion. Don't let that stop you. Pray for that compassion, pray that you would have that vision of Jesus that looks over the crowds and sees the faces.

To get to the heart of praying for missionaries, we ask to have God's heart of compassion. AND we also seek to know God's sense of urgency. Jesus says to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." This time, Jesus uses the metaphor of a field that is ripe for harvesting. In an agrarian culture, this would have resonated. After waiting for the crops to grow, there was really a limited time to harvest the crops, a month or two at best, before rain came and destroyed it or before the crops rot. There's an urgency to harvest. If there are not enough workers to harvest, it's not just a waste, it's a threat to life! That harvest means food through the winter. So Jesus is not just saying, "Aw, that'd be a waste." The urgency of the harvest is the difference between life and death.

Just this past week Megan went to visit an ~~old~~ friend celebrating her 40th birthday in a strange and distant land... Santa Barbara, California. Megan had a remarkable experience while she was there. She ended up having 29 spiritual conversations over the course of a four-day visit, sharing her own testimony 2 times, and sharing the gospel many times. She would call me and say, "Larry, people are so hungry to talk about God down here." She told me about one bartender who she ran into who asked her, "You guys have a good vibe. Where does your vibe come from? Where can I go to get this vibe?" When Megan and I lived in Massachusetts for seminary, we had to stop going to coffee shops because we'd be interrupted by people who saw what we were reading and wanted to have a spiritual conversation. We couldn't get our work done! The irony is that in places here in America where there aren't many followers of Jesus, people are hungrier than ever for the good news of Jesus.

I wonder if our image of the world is too often like a barren desert, and not the ripe field that Jesus sees. We imagine that the world is empty, dry, hostile and we hunker down. I imagine Jesus would look at places like Santa Barbara and Massachusetts and see fields of people eager to hear good news. Ready to

find healing and wholeness in their lives. Looking for answers to their own purpose and meaning. Trying to understand God. But where are the workers? Who is there to talk to them? Who is there to invite them into community with God?

But remember that God is on a mission. He's already doing the work of preparing hearts. And people are so hungry. They are ready to be plucked for the harvest. Megan's story is only one of many. In China, in the midst of continued systemic persecution, the church continues to explode because Chinese people are desperate for purpose, and atheism, Confucianism, and the burgeoning material wealth of their country will not provide it. Chinese churches are so captured by the vision of the ripe fields that they are actually beginning to send missionaries to the Middle East, gaining access to countries that would otherwise be closed to Westerners. In the Middle East, God is preparing the way among hundreds upon hundreds of Muslims who are having visions and dreams of Jesus. We have story after story of Muslims who will go to the first Christian they know and say, "Tell me more about Jesus who appeared to me." The harvest is ripe, who will go? Who will go?

As we pray for our missionaries, I hope you sense the urgency of Christ in this. He longs for people to come alongside him in his mission, he sees that there are many who are ready to hear Good News... who will go? The irony of this passage is that immediately after he asks the disciples to pray for workers... he calls those disciples. The answer to their prayer was themselves. The answer to that prayer may be you.

The way that God is using people to carry out his mission today is by using the ordinary things of our lives. Today, he's sending out engineers, pilots, and doctors to be engineers, pilots, and doctors in other places of the world. He even sends people to just teach English. Some of those people go on our short-term mission trips. Some of those people go to stay in other places for a long time. But in our world today, more than ever the world is coming to us. Here in the Seattle area we have communities of Somalis, Afghanis, Congolese, Honduran, Venezuelan, Ethiopian, and more, and we have the chance to be hospitable to them, to share the love of Christ so that when they come to know Jesus they can in turn share his love with their people in a way that we simply could never do. So in our time of history, we have this incredible opportunity to reach the world without ever leaving our homes. We also have this amazing access to the world because of the skills we can gain as Americans.

I pray you are feeling the compassion of Christ for the lost sheep. I pray you are sensing the urgency of Christ for the harvest. The first, the most important thing you can do, is to pray. In your bulletins you have an insert. I'd like for you to tack that up somewhere like your mirror, or on your computer monitor, refrigerator. We've collected some of the prayer needs of missionaries who are supported by Chapel Hill. Keep them in front of you. Pray with the compassion and urgency of Christ for them.

But don't forget, we are on mission with Jesus too. May God's heart of compassion and urgency call us to be people of Good News throughout Gig Harbor, the Puget Sound, and even the whole world.