

## *Two Ways of Looking at the Island*

Matthew 9:35-10:1

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

April 18, 2009

There are many ways to look at Block Island. Those of us who live here in the winter see it differently than those who come only in summer. I showed Ron around the island yesterday under gray skies. He saw it as a newcomer who had never seen it under a bright sun; I saw it through my memories of brighter days. Census takers see the island in a different way than Malcolm Greenaway does with his camera. As I poet I see it differently than Becca does when she is doing a watercolor. The teenagers of the island see it very differently from their parents. Those who have lived here all their lives see it differently from those who have landed here recently.

What I want us to think about today is how Jesus sees Block Island. I started down this path when the Bible study group came to Matthew 9 and the familiar words about Jesus looking out on the crowds. Back to back are two different ways of looking at the same crowd. First he is moved with compassion because he sees the people as sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless. Second he sees the people as a harvest ready to be gathered in, if only there were more workers.

The first lens through which Jesus sees the world is compassion. Just think of what it means to see the world that way—not to see people as sinners but as helpless, not to see them as bad but as lacking a guide. The word for compassion in the Greek New Testament has an interesting root. It comes from the word for intestines. To be moved by compassion is to be moved in your guts. You see that root meaning reflected in the King James Version where it speaks of not shutting up “the bowels of compassion” or Paul says that he feels for the Philippians “with the bowels of the Lord Jesus.” We sometimes say today that a film or a book moved us deeply. What does that mean? I think we understand that when we are emotionally stirred it is not a head experience; it is not even, really, in our hearts, in the middle of our chests. It seems to come from somewhere deeper, down in our guts. When someone else’s pain really gets to us, we say that we are “all torn up inside” or “all churned up.” That’s the kind of compassion Jesus has. One translator says “he became sick to his stomach with love.”

If we trace the usage of that word through the first three gospels we see that it is usually followed by an active response. When Jesus is moved with compassion, when his guts are stirred, he does something to help. He has compassion on hungry crowds, so he feeds them. He has compassion on two blind men, so he gives them sight. He has compassion for a leper, so he takes the risk of touching him to heal him. He has compassion for a widow who has lost her only son, so he brings the young man to life again. All of these stories are told to point to the way Jesus looks at us: Jesus had compassion on me so he reached out to me; he touched me and healed me.

When Jesus looked at the crowds of his day through the lens of compassion, what did he see? They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Harassed—that means tormented persistently, worn out, badgered, pestered, hounded. Who was harassing them? You could make a case that it was the Romans who occupied their country. You could make a case that it was the rich who took advantage of the poor without mercy. But judging from the context of Jesus’ teaching, I’d say the most likely suspects are the religious leaders, the scribes and

Pharisees, who drove people crazy with religion. Nobody is a worse pest than a religious pest. Nobody can badger you like someone who thinks it's his divinely appointed task. Jesus says two chapters later, "Come to me, you who are exhausted and burdened down by the heavy yoke of religion. Take my yoke upon you, the yoke of the kingdom, the yoke of walking alongside me, and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus says what drives him crazy about the Pharisees is that they keep burdening people down with rules and don't lift a finger to help them live that way. They prefer to have a reason to condemn them.

Do you ever think of Jesus as coming to set people free from religion?

Matthew also tells us that Jesus sees the crowds as helpless. They have no one to help them. The civic leaders who are supposed to help them are sold out to the Roman Empire and its economy. Some of the religious leaders have also compromised with the Empire and others who remain apart from Rome are so tradition-bound that they put tradition ahead of people. The traditions started as something good, Jesus says. God gave them to Israel for the benefit of the people, to give you a better life and bring you closer to God. But you have made those traditions into chains to bind people and status-markers to say that you are better than others. I am fulfilling all those traditions, Jesus says. I am the relationship they were pointing to. I am here to connect you back to God and give you God's life.

The crowds are like sheep without a shepherd. What do shepherds do? Guide and protect. Jesus is talking to an extremely religious society, one where there are many self-proclaimed guides. But no one is really guiding the people to what they need—the spiritual green pastures and still waters. Just as today, in Jesus' day there was no shortage of spiritual guides. There is a rabbi or guru on every corner ready to tell you how to live in great detail, ready to send you a DVD or a book or a prayer cloth or a crystal. And yet there are few real shepherds. Those teachers' agenda is not to take care of you but to get you to agree with them and to get you to take care of them materially. That's the difference between a pastor (the Latin word for shepherd) and a motivational speaker.

Most of the time in the Old Testament when you hear someone referred to as a shepherd it is a metaphor for the king. The king is the shepherd who protects and leads the people of Israel. To say the Lord is my shepherd is to say that Yahweh is my king. But Jesus sees that these people have no king, no real king. Herod is a puppet who takes care of himself, not a shepherd. And remember that in the verse just before this we are told that the core of Jesus teaching was the arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus' message was to announce that God is the king and you can begin to live in his kingdom now, not at the end of history. Jesus sees that these people need a king, and God is the king they need, the king they have always needed.

So how do we look at Block Island through the lens of compassion? When we allow ourselves to be moved as Jesus was by the hurts of people, we will see all around us people who feel harassed and helpless. The poor who cannot pay their rent or their electric bill. Gay people who are stereotyped. Hispanics who are left pretty much on their own and not included in our social gatherings or churches. Teenagers who feel trapped on the island and who see that much more is provided for young children than for them. Kids who have been labeled as bad. Victims of sexual abuse. Singles who don't know how they will ever find partners in a place like this. Divorced parents who are deprived of their rights to be with their children. Summer residents who feel they are being ripped off to pay for services for the islanders. Islanders who feel that summer residents are taking away their rights and making selfish decisions that affect them. People who are victims of the relentless Block Island gossip mill. Anybody who has to shop at the BIG. In the words of Neal Young, "Helpless, helpless, helpless."

So what do we do? We allow ourselves to be moved. Then we do what Jesus did, we reach out to people one by one, trying to be healers and includers and messengers of God's love. We proclaim God's reign in this place, now. We protect the weak. We point people to the real shepherd, Jesus himself. We move from focusing on our own comfort to focusing on the needs of others. You are not on a permanent vacation. You are on a permanent vocation. This is your one and only life for which you are accountable to Jesus. We give up pretending that dropping money in the plate is enough or that being a good person is enough, and we realize that Jesus wants us to become like him in this place—people who bring good news and healing.

We could be overwhelmed by this. Compassion could drown us or burn us out. To be open to the pain around us is painful. To draw close to God is to share his tears. But Jesus moves immediately in Matthew to another way of looking at the crowd. This time he looks through the lens of ripeness. He looks at people and sees a harvest. Jesus looks at all the helpless people and sees people who are ready for the kingdom. They are like plants that started long ago and there was a time when it would have made no sense to go out into the field to gather them in, but now it is time to gather because the fruit is ripe for the picking.

I think these are the eyes we need at Harbor Church—eyes that see that people are ready for God to move in their lives. I think a good many of you see the hurt and the need around you, but there are few of you who see a harvest which demands laborers. Few of us are persuaded that this is a time of ripeness. Not many of you grew up on farms, but you may understand that when it's time for the harvest you can't wait. I remember going camping with bunch of church boys when I was about 16. We were on a farm outside of Nashville that was owned by an attorney in my church. We had a great night around the campfire and gigging frogs, but about 5 in the morning this lawyer came around and woke us up. "I've got fields full of hay ready to be baled and rain is coming and we've got to get it into the barn. I'll give you \$1.50 an hour each" (which meant for the church for our program, not for us). We had no choice. I had asthma and I still had no choice, even if it meant missing school later. It was harvest time. It had to be done.

That's the sense of urgency Jesus wants us to have about Block Island. Open your eyes! The harvest is ready. Nobody's out there telling people about the kingdom or offering healing and bringing them to follow Jesus. There are people who are ripe right now who may never be ripe again. Jesus is not here asking his disciples to break up hard soil to plant the seed. He's already done that. He's calling them to joy. The harvest is the fun part. On Block Island we are being called by Jesus to gather in what is already ripe. It's like going through an apple orchard looking for the ripe ones. How did they get so big and beautiful? It's a mystery. Our job is just to gather them in. Yeah, it's work. It can be tiring. But it's not drudgery. This is the payoff. This is a celebration.

Take the word of this one disciple who's baptized maybe two or three hundred people, most of them converts. Most of the time I had little to do with the harvest I got to reap. Most of the time the fruit just dropped in my lap, because God has already been working in someone's life—through a family member or a neighbor or a teacher or a TV preacher, you never know. But someone has to be there to say "Why don't you become a follower of Jesus and ask him to come into your life? Why don't you become part of our family at Harbor Church?" It doesn't take a professional to do that at all. It just takes someone who chooses to see people not just as harassed and helpless, but also ripe.

You notice what Jesus said after he says that there is plenty of fruit but not enough pickers. He tells his disciples to pray that God will send someone out into the fields to gather the harvest. That's what I'm praying, Jesus says. You pray that way too. And then you notice what

Jesus does in the very next verse. He says to the twelve disciples, “Guess what? I’m sending you into the fields to gather the harvest. You are the answer to your own prayers. The job the Father gave to me I am now giving to you.” It’s one thing to look at Block Island as theoretically ripe. Look at all the people who never go to church. Look at all the children who have never heard about Jesus. Someone ought to get out there and meet that need. It’s another thing to look at Block Island as my field into which I am sent to bring in a harvest God has already prepared. That’s the lens Jesus is giving us to look through this morning. That’s the joy to which Harbor Church is being called.