

Called to care (Matthew 9:35–10:8)

In Matthew 10, something shifts. Something moves Jesus to call on the disciples.

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This week's reading from Matthew records the moment when Jesus summons and sends out the 12 disciples. Up to this point, Jesus has been a singular teacher, but here he calls the Twelve as partners and collaborators to preach, teach, and heal alongside him. The passage begins narrowly with a focused description of Jesus' holistic mission to care for the minds, bodies, and souls of the people he meets. It ends by echoing much of this language to describe the work of the Twelve. Jesus calls them to "cure every disease and sickness" and "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Matthew's parallel structure and parallel language demonstrate that the 12 disciples are summoned, commissioned, and equipped by Jesus to preach, teach, and heal just as he does. The one has become many.

At this point, Jesus is deep into his ministry. He has preached to huge crowds, called the first disciples, and seen the seekers and followers grow day by day. It seems most likely that the Twelve named here—Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas (v. 10:2-4)—have been with Jesus for some time. They have traveled with him far and wide, watched him teach and heal, and stood in the crowds with him. But today, something shifts. Something in the crowd moves Jesus to call on them.

Uniquely among the gospels, Matthew connects this event to a particular experience Jesus has with the crowd that has gathered to him on that day: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Then Jesus gives the well-known proclamation, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," and then he calls the Twelve to the ministry themselves. But it begins with the particular way Jesus sees the crowd.

Many read this scene and Jesus' swelling compassion as a moment of profound spiritual care. Cleophus LaRue, writing at Working Preacher, emphasizes the context of unjust power and oppression. For LaRue, the imagery of "sheep" and "shepherd" is plucked straight from Ezekiel 34 and thus "suggests exploitation at the hands of the leadership." Jesus sees the people's spiritual and material need, their personal and structural suffering, and he is so moved that he immediately calls the disciples to expand this ministry of holistic care. He calls them to go and to do as he has done.

To go to "the lost sheep," as Jesus tells the disciples to do, is not simply to teach, preach, or evangelize as we might generally construe it. It is to care boldly and radically in the face of empire's exploitative power. It is to see others with compassion and to live with a compassion that is both humble and bold.