

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES DO NOT DETERMINE YOUR WORTH”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 9:35-10:8

*This sermon was preached by Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, June 14, 2026
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Matthew 9:35-10:8

The Harvest Is Great, the Laborers Few

35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

The Twelve Apostles

1 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. 2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

The Mission of the Twelve

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ 8 Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Your Circumstances Do Not Determine Your Worth

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Our children’s hymn this morning, “His Eye is on the Sparrow”, has been a song of comfort to many for more than a century, not because a sparrow is so beautiful or significant, but precisely because it is so small and seemingly insignificant.

The song has given hope to generations of people during seasons of struggle and sorrow, because it reminds us that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from God’s attention. It reminds us that God notices what other people overlook.

In a world that often measures worth by such standards as success and wealth, appearance and achievement, it is comforting to know that God sees things differently.

This was a part of the lesson Samuel had to learn in our Old Testament lesson this morning.

Samuel arrived at Jesse's house expecting to anoint Israel's next king, and so, when Jesse's oldest son Eliab stepped forward, Samuel thought to himself, "Surely this is the Lord's anointed."

And why wouldn't he? After all, Eliab looked like a king, he carried himself like a king, he had the stature of a king. I dare say, if Samuel had been chairing a committee, the meeting would have lasted all of thirty seconds.

But God was searching elsewhere and he said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

As it happened, there were other sons of Jesse to consider, and the one that captures our attention this morning is Jesse's youngest son, David, who apparently wasn't important enough to be called in from the field. It seems that no one expected David to be King. No one but God, that is!

Which brings us again to that important truth: that there is often a big difference between the way the world evaluates a person and the way God does.

What's more, God sees not only the people we are, but also the people that God is fashioning us to become.

We find this Biblical truth in our New Testament lesson as well. Matthew tells us that Jesus traveled throughout the towns and villages teaching and preaching and healing.

And we come across this phrase: "when he saw the crowds..." Now, at first glance, those words jump out at us. Perhaps they should because there is a big difference between looking and seeing.

We could have walked through downtown Charleston during Spoleto and looked at a thousand people and not "seen" one of them.

But Jesus is different. He doesn't just look at the people of those cities and villages; he actually sees the burdens they carry. He sees the fears they don't show anyone. He sees their spiritual hunger!

Matthew says about the people in today's story, that they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." When Matthew talks like that, he's letting us know that the people Jesus saw had been beaten down by life. Matthew's word choice also carries with itself the idea of the people having been cast aside or thrown down.

These people who might otherwise be an annoyance or a distraction to the world, they are the focus of our Savior. In fact, Jesus wasn't annoyed by them at all. He wasn't frustrated by them. On the contrary, the Bible tells us that Jesus "had compassion for them."

"Compassion" is another choice word. In fact, compassion is one of the most beautiful words in the New Testament, because it reveals to us something of the nature of God's love.

Oh, I suspect that most of us would have seen a crowd, but Jesus saw the situations and their souls because he knew them.

He knew those parents who were doing everything they could to hold their families together. He knew how tired those day laborers were. The ones exhausted by the daily demands of life.

He knows when we sit anxiously in a doctor's office waiting for test results. He knows the grief we experienced as we watch a dream begin to unravel. He knows the deep and pressing questions that we sometimes have about our own worth. He knows us too!

The Psalmist writes: "O Lord, you have searched me and know me."

This should serve to remind us that while our circumstances are real, they do not tell the whole story, because our worth is not grounded in our accomplishments or our titles or even our perceived usefulness. No! Our dignity and our worth is rooted and grounded in the goodness and love of God!

For we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are created in the image of God, and because, in life and in death, we belong to God. Our circumstance will never have the last word.

God does! But here is an important distinction. Notice how Jesus' word does not leave us where we are. To that point, here in Matthew's Gospel, the compassion of Jesus leads directly to the mission of Jesus.

Upon seeing the crowds, we are told, Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." He then reassembles twelve ordinary men for a task.

And who were they, again? Well, they were fishermen, among them was a tax collector and even a zealot. All imperfect men. People whom most others would have overlooked, but here again, Jesus saw more!

As it happens, God delights in using ordinary people, frail people, fallen people.

A few years ago, a young wife was talking with her husband's sister, and the sister was sharing stories from her brother's childhood and mentioned that middle school had been especially difficult for him.

He had vocal tics which were accompanied by involuntary muscular movements. He would make noises he couldn't control and shrug his shoulders, and he did other things that made him stand out.

As they talked, the sister shared something that the wife had never heard before. Apparently, some of the boys on his soccer team had a secret nickname for him. Because of those involuntary muscular movements, they called him "The Tick."

Later that day, the wife walked over to her husband, gave him a great big hug, and said, "I'm so sorry they called you 'The Tick.'" As it turns out, the secret nickname was a secret even unto him. Somewhat incredulously, he said, "They called me what?"

By now you may have guessed that that husband was me. Growing up with Tourette Syndrome came with some challenges, and for a season of my life, really did wonder whether that diagnosis would define my future.

But, by God's grace, it did not. The diagnosis was real, and the struggles were real, but they did not define me!

Through the experience I learned to depend on God. I learned about perspective and perseverance, but probably most importantly, I learned that our identity is not found in limitations or labels or nicknames. Our identity is revealed in the God who made us and loves us and who calls us according to His good purposes.

Of course, the circumstances of our lives are different, maybe for another person it is a disappointment or a financial hardship or a family wound or maybe it is some other kind of loss.

The circumstances may be different, but the temptation is the same: that we might mistakenly believe that it is our circumstances that determine who we are.

In so many ways, the Bible is one long story about God using people that the world would never have chosen. Too young, can't speak, past mistakes. But the narrative of God's grace is just that, grace. And God has continually used unlikely and very fragile vessels to carry his message into the world.

"But Holton, I'm no disciple, I'm no apostle and can't do hardly any of the things they did." And you're right! The calling of the Twelve was unique, Jesus granted them power and authority which belonged exclusively to that foundational apostolic era, that period of time when God was establishing Christ's Church. So, our calling will look different from theirs. But it is the same Holy Spirit that is at work in our lives today.

The harvest is still plentiful. People are still harassed and helpless. People are still wondering whether anyone sees them.

One of the most beloved singers associated with the song "His Eye is on the Sparrow" was Ethel Waters. Many people knew her as a gifted singer and actress, but what many people did not know was how difficult the beginning of her life had been.

The world might not have thought much of her seeing as she was conceived as a result of force and violence. She was raised in poverty. Most people would have just assumed that her life would always be defined by those circumstances, but God saw something different.

God saw a sheep of his own flock, a blessed soul who could be used for His glory.

Later in life, Ethel Waters attended a Billy Graham crusade in Madison Square Garden and recommitted her life to Christ. Reflecting on that experience she said this:

"In 1957, I, Ethel Waters, a 380-pound decrepit old lady, rededicated my life to Jesus Christ, and boy, 'because he lives.'" She said, "Just look at me now." She went on to say, "I can thank God for the chance to tell you that his eye is on all of us sparrows."

Ethel Waters understood what Samuel learned in Bethlehem that day. She understood what that crowd experienced when Jesus saw them and acted with compassion. She understood what Jesus' disciples discovered when he called them into service and it's the same thing God would have us to understand today.

But the good news of the Gospel is that our circumstances do not determine our worth! Jesus has determined our worth!

And Jesus sees us and knows us and loves us. God has promised to never leave or forsake us, for His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.