OPEN YOUR EYES
Matthew 9:35-38


During our mission trip to Russia in March, 2008, several of us visited a Russian Orthodox Church in Alapaevsk on a freezing, snowy day. The building is over 300 years old. When we entered this run down cathedral, there was a poor, dirty, little boy playing on the floor with a kitten. When church officials saw what was going on, they chased the boy out of the building but let the cat stay in. Just didn’t seem like something Jesus would do. And it made me wonder how those church officials could close their eyes to this boy and his need.

But then another thought struck me immediately: I close my eyes to more needs than I want to admit. Jesus did not. Jesus was a man with eyes wide open. I can be easily distracted or too lost in my own little world, so I miss a lot. Jesus didn’t miss much of anything … of anyone. Hear the word or the Lord … (read the text).

I

Just because something is in front of us doesn't mean we'll see it. There we stood looking at the remains of a wreck. I was driving down the road after taking my son to school when suddenly, right there at the corner of Persels and Jefferson, a van came through a stop sign and plowed me good. Thank God no one was hurt—although the van driver might have been burned a little bit. He was sort of pulling on his shirt and pants which were now drenched with hot coffee. "You okay?" I said.

"I'm okay. How about you?"

"Fine," I said. "But I can't say the same for my car."

"Sorry, buddy. Didn't even see you."

And I wanted to say, "What do you mean you didn't see me? Are you blind or something? How could you not see this blue car on this bright day on this wide
road? I was right in front of you for crying out loud. And if you had been paying attention, your coffee would be in your cup instead of on you, you big doofus."

That’s what I wanted to say, but I didn’t. After all, I am a Christian and a pastor. And he was a big ol’ boy. I was plenty angry, but I couldn’t help but think of times when I didn’t see things that were right in front of me ...

"Where’s the ketchup?" I said as I was pilfering through the refrigerator. "Why does everything have to be so hard to find." And then Dayna walks over to the fridge, points it out, and says, "It’s right here in front of your face, you big doofus."

"Where are my keys?" I was in a hurry to leave. "Okay, who’s been messing with my keys? I always put them right here on the counter." And then Dayna said, "Look in your hand." And what do you know: I was holding my keys all the time. Just because something is in front of us doesn’t mean we’ll see it.

II

And that goes for seeing people too. "What’s the deal? I walked right past you in the mall yesterday and you didn’t nod or wave or anything." And you say, "I’m sorry, I didn’t see you." Or have you ever waved at people on the road only to have them miss you altogether? I had a short little friend named Bill who went into this tunnel vision thing when he was driving. You could wave, honk, even hang out the window and frantically flail your arms, and Bill wouldn’t see a thing. Just because someone is in front of us doesn’t mean we’ll see him either.

When I go to visit a church family member in a nursing home, I usually make a beeline for the room. I’m typically in a hurry, and it can be so heart-wrenching in places like that, I’d rather not look. But every now and then I do, and I am amazed at how much I’d been missing. Just because someone is in front of us doesn’t mean we’ll see her.

Why do you think that is? Do we rush too much? Are we so preoccupied with other things that we don’t notice the very people who cross our paths? A few years ago, a man boarded a New York City subway at rush hour and died in his seat. Investigators said there was no sign of foul play … he just died.
That’s odd enough, but you want to hear something stranger yet? His dead body rode the subway almost five hours while people got on and off the train riding from Manhattan to the Bronx and back again. Authorities speculated that no one noticed him because the train was so crowded and people were in such a hurry.\(^1\) Maybe we don’t see people because we’re in a hurry too: Got to get to Wal-Mart. Got to get to practice. What time does the game come on? We’re going to be late for church. We rush. We hurry. Maybe that’s why we don’t always see the people in front of us. Or maybe ... maybe we just don’t care.

III

Listen to Matthew: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them.” Jesus had been working at a frantic pace. People were coming to him with every ailment under the sun. There were a couple of demon-filled maniacs who lived among the tombs in Gadara. There was a pitiful paralytic lugged by some of his friends who knows how far just to get him to Jesus. There was a dinner engagement at the home of Matthew. There was a father pleading with Jesus to come lay hands on his sick little girl. And as Jesus pushed through the crowd to get to that house, another needy woman with a bleeding problem slowed Him down. She didn’t mean to slow Him down. She knew He was a busy man. She tried secretly to reach out and touch his robe in the hopes that that would heal her. But Jesus stopped and dealt with her directly. Then, once she was cared for, Jesus went on to the home of the little girl. By the time He got there she was dead. So Jesus brought her back to life. And when He left that house, a couple of blind men started begging for His help. Then a demon-filled man who couldn’t speak was brought to Jesus for healing. And in the midst of all this, Jesus was trying to get twelve men ready to go out on a mission trip. And you think your calendar looks full! The demands never ceased. The needs never ended. This constant parade of people just kept marching to Jesus’ door.

And in the midst of this busy ministry, Jesus had to endure critics who questioned Him, enemies who insulted Him, and doubters who laughed at Him. But Jesus still preached good news. And wherever he went, the crowds still came: the curious, the sick, the diseased, the demon-possessed. And now the amazing part: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them."

\(^1\)Cited by David Johnson in his sermon, The Meaning of Doing Likewise, First Baptist Church, Taylor, TX, (June 3, 2001).
Jesus saw the crowds. Jesus had the ability to actually see the people who were right in front of Him. They caught His eye. He noticed them. In spite of His busy schedule, in spite of all the demands upon His life, Jesus still saw the people in front of Him. They never became a faceless blur or a formless mass. They were people. And Jesus saw them. He didn’t look over them, around them, or through them. He didn’t look past them to the next thing on His schedule. He saw them. He didn’t look upon them as objects He could use to meet His needs or achieve His goals. He saw them. In spite of their neediness, in spite of the amount of time and energy they would drain, Jesus saw them.

And He had compassion for them. Compassion—sympathy, empathy. Jesus felt for them. Their conditions touched His heart. “They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Instead of looking down on them, Jesus considered their plights: What must it be like to be blind? To be sick for twelve long years? To be isolated from synagogue and society? How terrible to be at the merciless whims of demons! How agonizing to watch your child die! Jesus’ heart was stirred by these people. He felt it in His gut. He had compassion for them. Jesus didn’t see them as an interruption in His schedule. He didn’t see them as an intrusion on his time. He saw them as persons in need of His love and His touch. I’ve visited in a lot of hospitals over the years, but I’ll never forget the sign I saw at a nurses’ station in one of them. The sign read: “Patients are not an interruption to our work; they are the reason for our work.” That’s the way Jesus looks at people. People count. People matter. People are important to God—lost people sick people, hurt people, broken people, needy people. Jesus saw them, and He had compassion for them.

Now please don’t confuse pity for compassion.

Pity looks and says, “How awful.” Compassion weeps and says, “I’ll help.”

Pity looks on from afar. Compassion rolls up its sleeves and pitches in to help.

Pity waits for a convenient time. Compassion knows no office hours.
Pity is cheap and plentiful. Compassion is rare and priceless and costly.

Jesus looked on the multitudes and said, “I have compassion.” Then He taught and healed, fed and forgave, and went to the cross to die.²

When Jesus saw the crowds, He didn’t have pity on them; He had compassion for them.

But maybe compassion is not the most amazing quality we see in Jesus. The fact that He sees these people is what’s so amazing. Unless your heart is a stone, compassion is not hard to feel once we really make the effort to see the people in our paths.

I heard Tony Campolo talk of eating supper in a restaurant in Haiti. A group of poor, hungry children stood at the window peering in, faces pressed against the glass. The waiter noticed that this scene was disturbing the customers, so he walked to the window ... and shut the blinds. “There,” said the waiter, “enjoy your meal.” But it was too late, Campolo had seen those children. And in seeing them, he had compassion on them.

IV

Do you see the people around you? Jesus calls us to look. Jesus saw the people around Him and He compared them to fields ready for the harvest. This metaphor communicates urgency. What happens when farmers don’t get the crop out in time? It rots in the ground. It spoils on the vine. Good, at best, for stock fodder or to be turned back over into the ground by the autumn plow. People are all around us. And many, many of them are ripe for the harvest. As a conference leader reminded me just a week ago, “Ministry is everywhere.” Do you see the people in your field?

Do you see the people in your circles of influence? There are people in your family, people with whom you work and play, people in your neighborhood, people you know already who have needs that Christ can meet. Do you see them? Do you have compassion on them? It’s easy to miss them. We see them so often that we hardly see them at all. We become as hardened

as they are to their lostness and their need. I remember working for years with a man named John. John was a very old man. He was upright, moral, a good husband, father, and grandfather. His wife was a committed Christian. John was not. I talked with him about Jesus on many occasions, and his usual response was, "Not interested. I don't need Christ. I do fine on my own." And in spite of the near-death of his wife and John’s own growing health troubles, John’s response to the gospel was always the same—"Not interested." I’d all but given up on him. He did start coming to church as a concession to his wife. And though he was right in front of me, I didn’t see him anymore—until one day. On that day, after I had preached a sermon on hell, I said to John, "I sure wish you would give your heart to Christ. I don't want you to go hell, John. I want you to go to heaven." And John said, "Maybe someday." In all the years of witnessing to John and relating to John, I had never heard him make even that noncommittal response: "Maybe someday." Do you suppose that there are people in your circle of influence, people you have sort of written off, who are "maybe someday" people? They may be close to a commitment if you would ask just one more time. They may be open to Jesus in some way if you would continue to see them and have compassion on them. Open your eyes to people like that. They may just be like a field ready for harvest. Do you see them?

Do you see the people in our community who need Christ? Some are down-and-out; others are up-and-out. And they march to the beat of a different drummer than Christ. We meet them in our Second Mile Ministry. We pass them on the street—some pushing a shopping cart, others with a pack on their back, others who just look wild-eyed and alone. We see them in an orange jumpsuit picking up trash on the side of the bypass. Do you see them or turn your eyes away? They are across the street at the track and show up in our own Fellowship Hall among our international friends. Do you see them? What about the up and out—we may work alongside them on the job, exercise with them at the gym, run with them on the trails, play cards with them at the bridge club, or play tennis or golf with them at the country club. They are all around us in our community. We rub shoulders with them every day. But do you see them?

And do you see them in our world? I have a cartoon in my files of a man who opened his front door only to find a globe in a baby basket. He exclaimed to his wife, "Look what somebody left on our doorstep." He's right. There are multitudes in our world who don't know Christ and who need Him desperately. We've seen them in Russia and Peru and Honduras and Nicaragua and Guatemala and India and Japan and West Africa and France and Serbia and
the Czech Republic and Alaska and Chicago and New York and Arlington. They are fields ready for harvest and they are closer than we think. Some live in the darkness of superstition; some are gaining the world but forfeiting their soul; others follow false and burdensome religions that offer them a slim chance but no promise of eternal life; and still others just hammer out an existence with no hope and little joy. “They are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Do you know why we ramped up our international mission efforts about ten years ago? Because I got sick as a dog on an international mission trip in 1986, I didn’t go back to the foreign field for 20 years. So in 2005, I went to Nicaragua with a small team from the church, led by Ted Ortigo, to help our missionaries, the Dickeys, in Operation Go. I went. I saw them. And God whispered to me, “There’s millions more like these, and the church in Hot Springs has the people and resources to take the gospel to many of them.” I saw them, and my life was wrecked for good. At the same time God was whispering this to John Wayne Smith. He took the mantle of building a foundation for a world-wide mission outreach from this church. Ken Wheatley followed him in that position and we can’t begin to estimate how many lives around the world have been touched for Christ because of the prayers and going and giving of this church. Oh how the multitudes need Christ! Do you see them?

V

It’s the seeing that leads to compassion—and the compassion leads to action. Did you hear about the boy and girl standing on her front porch at the end of their first date? The boy looked at her and asked, “Can I kiss you?” The girl cast a sly smile in his direction and said nothing, so the boy tried again. “I mean may I kiss you?” Again the girl smiled and said nothing. “Are you deaf?” the boy asked. “Are you paralyzed?” the girl answered.

Are we paralyzed, church? We get that way when we focus on anything other than God and people? It’s time to renew our compassion, roll up our sleeves, and move into the fields ready for harvest. With the love and grace of Christ, let’s meet needs and share Christ as we have opportunity. How’s your CQ these days—your Compassion Quotient? A lack of compassion paralyzes us and turns our eyes so that we focus only on ourselves rather than on God and others. A healthy dose of compassion can go a long way toward moving us to action. We don’t need a bunch of new training. We don’t need another pep
talk. We just need compassion. Leonard Sweet reminds us that our problem in missions and evangelism is not a lack of training; it’s that we don’t love enough. None of us need training to talk about or do things for people we love, do we? Lack of missions and evangelistic urgency and action means a lack of love.³

So how’s your CQ? It’s time to open our eyes and grow our compassion? Compassion leads to action. Compassion leads to evangelism and outreach and ministry and missions. Jesus saw the people and had compassion. “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few,” said Jesus. “Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” You and I can be the answer to that prayer as we enter the fields and work the fields with compassion and love. You have gifts and abilities God can use. It’s time to put them work. The harvest is plentiful—ripe for the picking. Compassion can move us into that harvest field and help us do a lot of good in Jesus’ name and Jesus’ power.

VI

But it all begins with seeing that field in the first place. Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mt. Rushmore fame, was once working on a head of Lincoln. A woman who was sweeping out his studio wondered what he was doing. One day she finally recognized the face of Abraham Lincoln emerging from the stone. Very much surprised, she turned to Borglum and asked, “How did you know that Mr. Lincoln was in the piece of stone?” And though he didn’t answer, we know the answer—because he looked.

If we’re not looking, chances are the people we pass day in and day out look to us like so many stone blocks instead of the real, flesh and blood people they are with dreams and hopes and fears and doubts and needs. Let’s start seeing faces instead of stones—the faces of people who need the love and grace of Jesus, the faces of people who need a church family like ours. Said Jesus, “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Will you pray for workers? Will you be one of those workers? Then roll up your sleeves, show some compassion, and work the field with Jesus. That’s where we need to be. That’s what we can do. And it’ll happen … if we’ll just open our eyes and see.

³Leonard Sweet, SoulTsnami (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 60.
PRAYER (a corporate expression of Brandon Heath’s “Give Me Your Eyes”)

Father, give us your eyes for just one second;
Give us your eyes so we can see
    everything that we keep missing.
Give us your love for humanity.
Give us your arms for the broken-hearted,
    the ones that are far beyond our reach.
Give us your heart for the ones forgotten;
Give us your eyes so we can see.
In Jesus’ name, amen.

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John Scott McCallum II