

SEEING MY COMMUNITY DIFFERENTLY

Texts: Matt. 9:35-38; Zechariah 8:1-8

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Introduction

Outside my office in the lobby at my Denver church sat two yellow chairs. I noticed them right away when I walked in the building for the first time. I'm sure at some point in the past some generous soul had given them. But they were worn thread bare. Worse, I'm guessing the upholstery hadn't been cleaned in about a decade. They were more gray than yellow. Dozens of sticky-handed children, coffee spilling adults, and sweaty youth had taken their toll. I hated these chairs. I decided right then that the chairs had to go.

Problem was, I seemed to be the only person who knew they existed. I began to drop the hints. "Who gave the yellow chairs in the lobby?" "What yellow chairs?" was the common answer. I couldn't exactly say the "dingy, stinky, ugly, yellow chairs outside my office" so I continued to drop hints. It was as if they were invisible to everybody but me. One day I forced the issue. "Oh those chairs," said the head of building and grounds. And they were replaced with an equally ugly and uncomfortable park bench.

It's a challenge to see things differently. Sometimes it's hard to see things at all. These past weeks we've been talking about seeing familiar understandings of God, the church, and the world differently – to see again with "missional" eyes. It's not easy. But it's what Jesus did best. He was forever telling stories about familiar kinds of people doing familiar kinds of things, and inviting his listeners to see what they missed.

Today we're going to round off our series "What is Missional?" by talking about seeing our community differently. This "everybody is somebody in Snellville" community is as familiar to many of us as my set old dingy yellow chairs, and to many just about as invisible.

- 1. As Jesus worked his way through the towns of Galilee – teaching, preaching the kingdom of God, and healing – he saw what everybody else saw. Crowds of farmers and fishermen, merchants and homemakers, tax collectors and prostitutes, the wealthy and the poor. But he also saw sheep. Crowds of God’s people “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”**

We read that when Jesus saw the crowds he had “compassion” on them. We make far too little of that word. For us compassion is “niceness” on steroids. But in the bible “compassion” is used commonly to describe God and rarely to describe people.

Compassion is a divine welling-up from the depths – a profound concern that alters your life. It’s not a technique, not a program, and not a mission trip. It is change in the way we see people that comes from deep in the soul. It’s more a conversion than an accomplishment.

Behind all Jesus did was who Jesus was – the Son of God the compassionate one. So he saw in the teeming crowds God’s lost children. And he invites people like us to follow him so we can become compassionate and see what he saw.

It’s so easy to look at our community and see something other than people that God cares passionately about. It’s so tempting to divide the crowd into the desirable and undesirable, deserving and undeserving, the ignorant, the frustrating, and a host of other groupings that come to mind. And that’s if we really see them at all.

This past week I was at the bank and decided to try an experiment. I tried to notice everyone who was there while I was. I was greeted by an Indian woman and took a seat next an African American couple. I was helped by a young white male teller. And as I waited I noticed an older man walking with one crutch breaking up the tellers telling them how his John Deere mower take could take any Snapper in a race. I heard an Asian teller helping an Eastern European woman. I saw a young guy come in with his pants sagging, wearing an attitude, to open a checking account. (I was conscious of how instinctively I didn’t like him.) I saw the Indian woman who helped me trying to help a Hispanic male who spoke little English, by getting a translator. This was my community.

Now that I saw them, the question is whether I could come to see God’s sheep. A missional church is one that has allowed the Savior to change its heart; not one that has simply tried to alter its program. Trying to imitate Jesus will only take you so far unless you have living connection by faith with him.

We won't see much differently unless we like needy sheep have received the gift of the compassion of Jesus.

2. So Jesus sees sheep. But compassion takes him to the next step. He sees a harvest field. And he sees us going into it.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest field. And then one paragraph later the Lord of the harvest does. He chooses his twelve disciples and sends them to continue his mission.

Jesus looks at the familiar town, full of familiar people, and sees God's harvest field. That's where he lived. And that's where we live.

When we drive our community, when we pass by our schools, when we stand among our neighbors do we see the harvest field? Are we willing to bring in the harvest?

This is a critical question for us. It's fine if we see Jesus at work on the other side of Atlanta or the other side of the world – and go there. Scripture even commands it. But not if we do it because we can't see him working across the street.

I got on the phone this week and I talked to several people. I called the mayor, the city manager, the police chief, and a friend in the counseling department at the school across the street. And I asked them, "From your point of view what could a church do to really touch this city?"

One of them said, "Tell your people to vote." (What do you expect when you ask a politician?) When we got beneath that he said so few people vote because so few know what happens in their community. Be informed. And when I asked where the pain was in the city he said we've got lots of people coming to court who can't afford to pay their fines. We have a growing number of senior adults who can't afford to keep up their homes.

The Chief of Police, the city manager, and the school counselor at South Gwinnett all said that touching young people in our community, both in terms of their education and their home life, was critical. Home's a conflicted place for a growing number of families and that's reflected in what happens at school. There are a number of families around us who need help learning how to be one. There are kids who need to learn how to study. A church could help with that.

I learned we have a growing homeless population around us but they don't congregate like they do in Atlanta. They live in their cars and keep moving until the gas runs out. Or they camp in the woods. How do you touch them?

The police department is feeling budget pressure like never before. It needs citizens to be eyes and ears in the community – to really know their neighbors. And our police department has no chaplain to assist officers and their families, or to help them deal with domestic issues that are often part of their jobs.

I could go on with this for a while. We're working on some these things – it's harder and slower than I thought. But do you see a harvest field in this community and are you willing to be one of the laborers sent to the field? Most of what I've mentioned doesn't cost much money. But it requires a huge change in perspective.

It takes compassion to see a harvest field among the familiar. To look at the place of our frustration or indifference, and join the Spirit of Christ at work.

3. Jesus sees things differently because he sees with compassion. He sees a harvest field among the familiar. And that's because he sees the hardest things healed and redeemed by the coming of the kingdom of God.

Jesus came preaching the kingdom – the final redemption and healing of all things in God's good time. Jesus can look upon those familiar sheep with much more than pity. He can see the potential of his community because he knows what God will finally do.

The prophet Zechariah had exactly that kind of eyes. As he looked among the Lord's people exiled to Babylon he didn't see only harassed wandering sheep, true as it was. He saw what God could, and would, make of them.

Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.

Takes one heck of an imagination to see the rubble of a once great city and walk away from it with a picture in your head of Saturday in the park. The kingdom of God is like a park where in which the old gather in safety to enjoy the leisure of a long life well-lived, and the young play without fears of pushers and internet predators spoiling their good time. The bible calls it "shalom". It was that hope that kept Zechariah in business.

How's our imagination? Do we believe God can do great things in our community? Can he touch people headed down the wrong path? Can he bring good news to the poor? Can he shed light into unbelieving hearts? Can God heal families that don't have a clue as to how to heal themselves? Do we see potential in our community?

So is it Westminster's job to create utopia in Snellville? To spend ourselves solving all the community's problems? No. Elizabeth Achtemier, one of my favorite biblical commentators, once wrote:

God's kingdom will not have come on earth until its streets are fit for its children. By the same token, it will not have come until its children are fit for its streets.

We can't make the kingdom come. We can't make all our community's streets fit for our children, or all our community's children fit for its streets. But we can make some downpayments on Saturday in the park. This family, that school, this neighborhood, that person trying to figure out what in life is worth living for... Here and there we can commit ourselves to bringing a small bit of Zechariah's vision to this community and invite men and women to join us in our calling.

And while we hope for kingdom come, we remember "there came a child – God's Son – who was fit for the kingdom. And because he came, God's playground for all children surely comes." (Achtemier)

Conclusion

You want to see this community differently? You'll need compassion to see it for what it is. And you'll need hope to work for what it's not.

That's how missional churches, and missional people, live - stretched out between Jesus' costly compassion on one hand, and God's unending hope on the other. And in between we learn to follow Jesus and be the church in the messy middle of life.