

“Insight into How We Might Respond to Needs around Us”

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

June 14, 2026

When the rock musical “Jesus Christ Superstar” premiered in 1971, there were many different reactions from people of faith. Some embraced the new work as an energetic modern presentation of the Jesus story while others thought it was blasphemous. The latter probably didn’t care for the rock music, but they also found offensive scenes in which different aspects of Jesus’ humanity were emphasized. For example, he was presented as being overwhelmed by the immensity of human need, as if it was simply more than he could handle.

But this was the goal of the production, according to lyricist Tim Rice in an interview with “Life” published on May 28, 1971. The writers wanted to emphasize Christ’s humanity and thought doing so would enhance his stature. The church affirms the humanity and divinity of Jesus. Contrary to what “The Da Vinci Code” character Leigh Teabing says, the canonical Gospels say more about Jesus’ humanity than the noncanonical. The biblical Jesus is very human.

We see evidence of this in today’s reading from Matthew. Jesus seems to be overwhelmed by the immensity of human need. As he goes about the cities and villages, teaching and healing, he feels compassion for the crowds because they are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He tells his disciples the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. So, they should ask the Lord of the harvest to send out more laborers. In other words, there is more than he alone can handle.

So, “Jesus Christ Superstar” was not off base in this regard, which is good news for me, since seeing this musical as a teenager drew me to the church in the first place, as I was captivated by the character of Jesus and wanted to learn more. My understanding of Christ has evolved over the years, but this image of Jesus being moved deeply by the immensity of human need has stuck with me and everything about his behavior in out text provides insight into how we might respond to needs around us.

The first thing Jesus does when he sees multitudes of people who are blind and disabled, struggling with various diseases and emotional burdens, poverty and oppression, is to have compassion. Not everyone who sees human need, even on a large scale, responds this way. Some respond with callous indifference, others with judgment. In Jesus' time, suffering was often viewed as judgment for sin. In our time, people often blame the victim for suffering — the poor are lazy, the abused did something to deserve their abuse, the addicted chose their paths, the woman should not have dressed that way. Even churches respond in different ways, sometimes offering direct help, empowerment, and advocacy; other times walking right past the poor and powerless.

Jesus responds with compassion. It is an intense emotion, literally meaning “from the guts” or “from the bowels,” but it is more than an emotion. Jesus' emotion leads to action. He heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, enables the mute to speak, cleanses people of whatever evil oppresses them. Most of us know the words of James 2:14-17. “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith, but does not have works? ... If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

In like manner, compassion by itself, if it is only a feeling, accomplishes nothing. But if the feeling is deep and genuine, from the guts, it will lead to action, as it does for Jesus. This is our calling as followers of Jesus, and there are many ways in which we pursue it in this church — through the clothing ministry, Toy Joy, And Also with 'Cue, White Flag, Rise Against Hunger, mission trips, and the support of CBF field personnel and the work of organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Urban Ministries, Oak City Cares, and A Place at the Table. It is difficult to be part of this church for long and not get caught up in some action on behalf of those who need our compassion.

The challenge in this time is not to give in to cynicism, not to be so overwhelmed by the immensity of need that we fail to do what we can to help. Jesus did say, “The poor will be with you always (John 12:8),” but he was quoting the first half of a verse from Deuteronomy, the second

half of which says, “So open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land (15:11).” Overwhelming need is not cause for complacency.

We may be tempted to embrace the message of a cartoon in which a pack of wolves stands on a cliff, looking toward a full moon, and doing what wolves do best, as the caption reads, “Are we making a difference?” Are we not just wolves howling at the moon trying to address problems like global poverty and racial division?

But the message we ought to embrace comes from a story about a man walking on a beach, throwing starfish back into the ocean. When the man is asked why he is bothering to do this when there are more starfish than he can throw back. What difference does it make? He replies, “A big difference for the ones I throw back.” It may be naïve and presumptuous to think we alone can solve systemic problems, but it is selfish and cowardly not to do what we can. Jesus responds to human needs with compassion. As his followers, so do we. As someone has said, “Put a mouse before a cat and you discover what a cat is. Put a person in need before a Christian and you discover what a Christian is.”

But there is something else Jesus does. He recognizes the need for help. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. So, he tells his disciples to pray for more laborers. Interestingly, the very next thing that happens is that he commissions *them* to do the work he has been doing — to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with a skin disease, cast out demons. In other words, assuming they heed Jesus’ command to pray, they become the answer to their own prayers. They are the very first additional laborers, which confirms the wisdom in the old adage, “Be careful what you ask for,” or even pray for apparently.

But as one scholar has noted, sometimes prayer is asking God to do what only God can do while other times, perhaps more often, it is seeking to align our lives with Divine intent. The latter is what happens to the disciples who labor in the field Jesus says is plentiful. But the critical thing to see here is that Jesus recognizes the need for help, very much like in “Jesus Christ Superstar,” and if Jesus cannot do it all alone, it’s not very likely that we can.

The goal is not to see how much need in and beyond the church one person, like a pastor, can address, or even one group of people, like a ministerial staff or deacons. The goal is to address as many needs as possible by involving as many people in service as possible. Within a given church, operations like our clothing ministry use dozens of people to address needs. If all our people who are homebound were willing to be included in homebound ministry, we would need a similar number of visitors. The White Flag program requires a huge number of people to work in the way we want it to, offering genuine hospitality.

But we are not the only hands and feet God has. There are other churches all around us, Jewish and Muslim friends, and many people of goodwill who care about things like affordable housing and the needs of immigrants. Finding ways to partner with others to accomplish more and reduce duplication just seems wise while it also takes seriously Jesus' teaching to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out more laborers.

We have built Habitat houses with other downtown churches and an interfaith group. The Wake Interfaith Immigration Network, which had a meeting last Sunday afternoon at Edenton Street United Methodist Church, is bringing together people of all faiths to support immigrants in need. Other churches have helped with White Flag. It just makes sense to partner with others, especially as followers of Jesus. We're not building our own fiefdom. We're participating in the reign of God, and we all have limits. If the very human Jesus needs help, so do we.

There are a couple other things we should note in our text. First, Jesus commissions disciples here to minister only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This is not where his mission ends. People of all nations are eventually included. It's just that in healing the world, he doesn't want to forget the people closest to him. Nor should we.

Second, it may seem like Jesus' calling is simple. He teaches and heals, then sends others to do the same, and they will, but not without opposition. Even Jesus will suffer and die. He later says he sends the disciples out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so they should be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. The call to compassion is not easy, especially in this time, but it is sacred, and it is to be shared with others.