The Cost & Courage of Following Jesus

Matthew 9: 35 – 10: 8

A sermon by Mila Linke

Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – June 14, 2026

As most of you probably know, I am Mila Linke. I'm a student. That makes me young. It also makes me your intern here at Bay Shore. And I want to personally thank Pastor Susie for allowing me to give the message. As an intern I need all the experience I can get. So it's not only our wonderful pastors who have shown me such love and grace but you all as well and it has touched my heart and made this calling so much easier. So I want to thank each and every one of you. Will you pray with me?

Oh loving and gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, holy one, and may your spirit guide us into truth, into courage, and into love. Amen.

Compassion, Courage, and the Cost of Following Jesus

Well, I originally titled this sermon "The Cost and Courage of Following Jesus." But as I got a little deeper into the scripture, I realized I had missed a third "C" completely: Compassion.

You know, you heard it from Matthew. The passage starts with compassion—not courage or cost. There is courage when Jesus asks the disciples to go out and see the world as he sees it, and then do the work. That's courageous. And, of course, the cost of following Jesus comes much later in the disciples' lives, and it was serious. But first, we hear that **Jesus had compassion for the people because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**

Sheep Without a Shepherd

Sheep are mentioned a lot in the Bible. But why sheep? I realized I didn't know much about sheep, so I looked it up. Sheep are vulnerable. I'm not sure they're all that smart—but that's just me.

They're not particularly good at:

- Finding food
- Avoiding danger

- Even getting themselves home

A shepherd provides:

- Guidance
- Protection
- Care
- Leadership
- Safety

Without a shepherd, sheep become:

- Lost
- Frightened
- Hungry
- Easy prey

Then I thought... Maybe we're kind of like sheep too. Jesus looked at the people around him and saw that same condition. They were spiritually exhausted, burdened, confused, and longing for direction. Just like us. But the message begins with compassion. **He had compassion for them.**

A Leadership Crisis

This image of sheep and shepherds would have been immediately understood by Jesus' Jewish listeners. Israel's leaders had failed to care for their people. You only have to read passages like **Ezekiel 34**, where God condemns Israel's leaders for neglecting their flock. Instead of caring for the people, the leaders cared only for themselves. Likewise, in **Numbers 27**, Moses prays for a leader so the people will not be like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus uses this language because he is quietly pointing to a leadership crisis.

The people had:

- Religious leaders
- Political leaders
- Social leaders

Yet they still felt lost.

This isn't simply a lesson about what we should do. Then—and perhaps now—it is also a political message.

Compassion Requires Courage

Compassion is demonstrated when we break down social barriers. That's where courage comes in. It takes courage to speak truth to power. Because let's face it... The powerful rarely appreciate being challenged. Jesus did exactly that. He welcomed outcasts. He challenged religious laws. He reached out to people no one else wanted to reach. At the time, religion often focused on rewards and punishment. Jesus replaced that with something much simpler: **Take care of one another.**

He was saying:

- Stop keeping score.
- Stop deciding who's in and who's out.
- Just care for each other.

Breaking the Mold

The Old Testament reflects a culture where violence, exclusion, and unequal treatment were often accepted as normal. Compassion certainly appears in the Old Testament, but it is frequently directed toward people who belong to one's own community. Jesus broke that mold.

Scripture says he went everywhere:

- Teaching
- Healing
- Curing

Without boundaries.
Without judgment.

Start Where You Are

As I reread this sermon, one verse caught my attention. Jesus tells the disciples: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles... but go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." At first that bothered me. How could I preach that God's love is for everyone if Jesus says this? Then I realized something. If you don't yet have the strength, experience, or courage to go far away—**Start here.**

Start:

- In your pew.
- On your street.
- In your neighborhood.

- Where you already live.

Then branch out.

The Harvest Is Plentiful

Jesus says: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." He tells the disciples to pray that God will send more laborers. Well... That prayer worked. There are churches all over the world filled with potential laborers. Including us. But being a laborer has a cost. The cost is living with compassion and courage. Quite frankly... It's easier not to. Many of us—including me—protect ourselves by looking away.

We look away from:

- Pain
- Injustice
- Loneliness
- Grief
- Poverty

But Jesus taught another way. He allowed himself to be moved. That is where it starts. Opening our eyes. Seeing what is really there. Courage isn't only speaking. It is refusing to become numb.

Hatching the Heart

Before Jesus sent the disciples into the world, he first showed them the world. He knew their hearts would break. Marcus Borg, the progressive theologian, wrote: "You need to transform the self by moving from a state of protective, closed-heartedness to an open, compassionate engagement with a wounded world." He called this **"hatching the heart."** It is a spiritual movement toward active, present-centered love.

Compassion That Costs Something

Many churches proclaim: "God's love is for everyone." But sometimes the unspoken message is: "...as long as you look like us, act like us, believe like us, love who we love, share our politics, and fit our expectations." That sounds a lot more like the old patterns Jesus challenged. Borg also wrote that practicing compassion transforms us. Maybe when we care for others... We are changed too. But don't

mistake compassion for something easy. It hurts. It may even break your heart. Because once you truly see suffering... You cannot unsee it.

Saying Yes Before Knowing

The disciples weren't scholars. They weren't priests. They weren't doctors. They probably weren't highly educated. They were ordinary people. What amazes me is that they said **yes** before they knew the outcome. Before everything was clear. Before they knew how the story would end. Sometimes that's exactly what life asks of us. A new job. A new baby. A move. A relationship change. Life throws us curves. We don't know the ending. Yet somehow... We move forward anyway.

Remembering the Pandemic

I've certainly experienced those moments. The scenarios I imagined in my head rarely happened. I can create terrifying futures all by myself. Most never become reality. I remember when COVID hit.

We thought:

- We'd never visit loved ones in hospitals again.
- We'd wear masks forever.
- We'd never enjoy restaurants again.
- We'd never gather with family.
- We'd never sit together in church.

Life hit us hard. Until it didn't. Eventually we found a new normal. I have a little granddaughter who's just over a year old. One day I'll tell her about the pandemic. I never had to walk ten miles through snow to get to school... But I did survive nearly a year without restaurant meals! I'll probably exaggerate the story just a little.

But here's what I really remember:
For a brief time, none of our usual divisions mattered. Rich or poor. Race. Politics. We were all facing the same crisis together.
And for a moment... We were changed. Sadly, I think we've drifted back to old habits.

That's why our work isn't finished.

The Work Before Us

Jesus never promised the disciples life would be easy. He simply told them: Take care of one another. Bring people together.

Offer:

- Acceptance
- Love
- Justice
- Healing
- Care

Stand with the marginalized. Stand with the forgotten. Change is never easy.

A World That Needs Laborers

When Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few," he was speaking to then... and to now. We live in a world marked by greed and division. Someone recently told me Elon Musk is now worth over a trillion dollars.

Whether that's exactly right or not, I looked up something fascinating.

- One million seconds ago was about 11½ days.
- One billion seconds ago was about 31 years.
- One trillion seconds ago was more than 31,000 years ago—during the Ice Age.

Even if those numbers aren't exact... The contrast is staggering. Some people and institutions possess unimaginable wealth. Others go hungry. Something needs fixing. Can we solve everything? No.

But we can:

- Speak up.
- Set an example.
- Use our voices.
- Keep trying.

The Third "C"

And that's where the third "C" comes back. **Cost.** Compassion sounds beautiful... Until it costs us something.

Real compassion costs:

- Time
- Comfort
- Certainty
- Sometimes relationships
- Sometimes reputation
- Sometimes peace of mind

Because once we truly see suffering... We cannot pretend we didn't.

Perhaps that's why so many people—and even churches—choose not to look. If we don't look at homelessness... We don't have to wrestle with it. If we ignore exclusion... We don't have to examine ourselves. If we ignore injustice... We never have to decide whether we'll speak. Compassion asks us to feel. Courage asks us to act. Both come at a cost.

The Prayer That Becomes the Answer

The disciples eventually paid that cost.

Many lost:

- Their freedom
- Their homes
- Their lives

But before any of that... They first had to surrender their comfort. Maybe that's where we are today. Jesus doesn't simply suggest this work. For those who follow him... It is the calling.

We are called to:

- Stand with those the world forgets.
- Love those others have declared unworthy.
- Keep our hearts open when it would be easier to close them.

Jesus first tells the disciples to pray for laborers. Then, almost immediately... He sends them. Isn't that often how God works? We pray for healing... Then we're

called to become healers. We pray for justice... Then we're called to become advocates. We pray for community... Then we're called to become neighbors. Sometimes the answer to our prayer... Is our own willingness to go. Compassion requires us to feel. Courage requires us to act. And there is a cost to both.

May we be willing to bear that cost.
May we love others as deeply as Christ has loved us.
Amen.