

Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
June 14, 2026

Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

Would you pray with me?

Gracious God: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I for one feel like now is the time for just one big deep breath—breathing in deeply, feeling that oxygen fill our lungs, filling every one of our cells, and then just exhaling it. Letting go all of the stuff that you might be worried about or holding onto, any of the stuff that you've brought into this space to just flow out of you in this moment. To simply just be. Here. With each other. Because that is what it's all about, isn't it? I actually had a spiritual director once who spent probably 10 minutes of each of our sessions breathing with me. And you know me, I was thinking to myself, like, this, is just a waste a time. I don't need to be taught to breathe. I mean if I do, then I'm in trouble. But when I went there the first time and sat down in the chair across from him he said to me, "You don't breathe much do you?" To which I wanted to reply, "Well, I mean, I must because, I'm still alive." But what he meant was really *breathe*, to relish the breath, to revel in it, to feel the cells of the body desperately cling to each oxygen atom. To slow down. To breathe. He's sensed my get-it-done energy, my fast pace, and he wanted me to slow down and to enjoy something so ordinary as breathing. The ordinary. We talk about it a lot. I talk about it a lot. It's now ordinary time. Though it hasn't felt very ordinary yet. We are indeed doing a lot of un-ordinary things these days—from last weeks momentous congregational meeting during worship which was a once in a century event, to Nina in the pulpit the week before, and in a couple weeks we will be out on the beach blessing surfboards, later on we will have Matthias in the pulpit. It just so happened to be that a lot of these big moments, which are so interesting, and big, and unique, and bittersweet all happened right at the beginning of so-called Ordinary Time. When I was in New England we were all envious of the Unitarian Universalists because there was a cultural tradition there where Unitarian churches functioned a lot like schools—people would take the entire summer off—at their houses on the Cape or traveling—and ministers would use the summer to be on "study leave." Which means they'd take that time to go about collecting all their sermon illustrations and inspiration by traveling about and visiting museums and things and they'd use those during the rest of the year. But the truth is that no time is ordinary, even though we might assign it that title. I'd like to think that we call it ordinary time just maybe as a reminder to us to breathe. And to breathe deeply. To appreciate what I've always called the sacredness and holy of the ordinary. The moments we might miss or think that are boring that are really full of meaning if we just peel back the surface a little bit and slow down just a moment, long enough to really breathe. To really notice.

In the text you heard this morning Jesus did some noticing of his own. We hear a story about an episode in Jesus' ministry where he's traveling through the cities and the villages, doing the work that he did. And it says when he saw the crowds he had compassion for them. He had compassion for them. That's not totally accurate because English is just so limiting. The Greek actually does a lot better job of conveying this—the word is actually *esplanchnisthe*. And what that means is a "twisting pain in the entrails, that is a writhing and intense emotion." In fact when translating from Greek to Hebrew this is the word that sometimes gets used for "womb"—to convey the pangs and agonies of childbirth. So this isn't just compassion, this is like a woman in labor—that's how Jesus felt when he saw the crowds—who were total strangers to him—and yet he had this intimate knowing, this intimacy with them that made his entrails ache for them. That was the kind of compassion he had.

This reminds me of an experience I had a couple weeks ago. I was at our Conference Annual Gathering and one of my duties as chair of this region was to install the new pastor of the UCC church in Altadena. I had never been to Altadena before—and it sure is something. I never fully appreciated the power and idiosyncratic nature of a fire. There were streets where the Eton fire absolutely destroyed every building

and directly across the street there would be no damage on anything. Almost as if the fire was a snake or an organism that slithered around choosing which side of the street to visit and what corners to turn down. The UCC Church in Altadena was completely destroyed in the fire—the week after their long time pastor retired. With no pastor and no building they had to completely rebuild everything that they knew about themselves. So as you can imagine it was a great joy and celebration to install their newly called pastor in the space that they are currently renting at Westminster Presbyterian Church just around the corner from where their beloved church once sat.

I've mentioned to you before that the liturgical color for installations and ordinations is red. So of course, I brought my red stole with me. The night before I was told that the liturgical color for the day was going to be pink. Well, first of all, that's not a liturgical color—I don't know many who even have pink stoles and I was a bit just flabbergasted by this but I didn't have the full story. And once I heard why pink was the color I was so on board. If you look closely in this picture of Altadena's sanctuary they had these paper origami cranes that hung from the ceiling in their sanctuary. Well, at the beginning of the service their moderator stands up and holds up a pink origami crane. It was the only thing from the church that survived the fire. And they set it in a basket which had this pile of what looked like shards of black onyx in—turns out those shards of shiny black glass were the remnants of their stained glass windows. And on top of it sat this vibrant, pink, crane.

UCC Altadena didn't choose this, ask for this, this was not something they could have ever imagined facing, but yet they are resilient. Because when they went back to walk through the rubble of what was, they found the thing that they'd cling to, to get them to where they are going. There's going to be a moment in every one of our lives where we are going to be faced with walking through the rubble of what remains and yet even in that mess, even in that charred heap there are harbingers of the future and they're just waiting for us to find them. So cool.

And I just know, I know that if Jesus was walking through Altadena the feeling would be that same compassion we hear about here—that compassion that rests deep in the gut, compassion that feels something like labor pangs, the intensity of it and the intimacy of his knowing—as if he knew every corner of Altadena and the hopes and fears of every person. There is this other moment in this story of Jesus' ministry where this feeling of compassion he has leads him to pray for more laborers. Reminds of a scene in Jesus Christ Superstar, Jesus, besieged by throngs who are seeking help, sings this line, "There's too many of you; don't push me; there's too little of me; don't crowd me." He needs help! He can't do it alone. In this text Jesus asks the laborers to pray for more laborers. And as he does this we see a critical moment in his ministry and that is when he looks at his followers and he sends them. Without him. It will be up to them to figure out how to do it, what to do, where to go. He is sending them out into the world—because the need is so great. The compassion so intense. And he needs *more* of those laborers.

During the Civil War there was a woman who was a clerk in the US Patent Office in Washington D.C. who upon hearing of the first bloodshed on the battlefield rushed to the train station where the wounded were being brought so that she could provide aid. She took out an ad in the newspaper asking for donations of supplies and it was well received. So brave was she that she started following around the Union Army and would be running through battlefields providing nursing care to wounded soldiers. This earned her the nickname "Angel of the Battlefield." She'd later fashion a red ribbon into a cross and sew it on her sleeve for protection. You all know who I'm talking about, this is Clara Barton, who founded the American Red Cross. Who lobbied Congress for a charter so that it would exist into perpetuity—eventually getting President Chester A. Arthur to sign the charter in 1882. This is like, I think, exactly what Jesus was praying for. The need is so great, but the laborers are so few. We need more laborers. One of Clara Barton's most famous quotes is, "you must never think of anything except the need, and how to meet it." There is so much need but so few laborers.

Though, by the grace of God we have one of those laborers among us in Angie. Who we celebrate today. This is her last Sunday with us for awhile because she will be (and yes I looked this up with exact

accuracy using the address of this church and the address of her base) 9,122 miles away from us in Djibouti, Africa serving a mission with the American Red Cross. Today we get to do something that is also not so-ordinary—something that doesn't happen very often—we are going to lay commission Angie in the United Church of Christ for service in the American Red Cross abroad. In our Congregational churches we have something in our Book of Worship that allows us to equip lay people for special assignments abroad. And so in a few minutes we are going get to share that with Angie.

I will tell you the people of Altadena UCC know the Red Cross well now—because during the Eton fire the Red Cross distributed over \$645,000 in direct financial assistance, provided 89,900 meals, and provided more than 9,450 overnight stays to those impacted by the fire. The harvest is plentiful, the need is so great, but thank God that there are laborers who are willing to be sent—laborers who don't know how they will do it, or where they are going, but ones who no less will go, and do what needs to be done.

When we Commission someone in the church we are not only lifting them and their service up but we are also recommitting each of ourselves to be sent in our own ways. For most of us going to Djibouti isn't in the cards. Most of us will be staying much closer to home, but this doesn't mean that Jesus isn't imploring all of us to go out and be sent into our own missions and fields. There are so many ways to respond to that calling. Like that scene in Jesus Christ Superstar, Jesus is just telling us “there's so many of you, but there's only one of me.” I need help. There are indeed so many ways to respond to that calling.

This past week I was watching a very emotional New York Times podcast interview with Lulu Garcia Navarro and Scott Pelley, of 60 Minutes fame, now formerly of 60 minutes. I'd commend it to you all. It is a masterclass in integrity. If only we all in this world could have such a clarity of vision and purpose as Scott Pelley. Scott Pelley, as you all probably know, was unceremoniously fired from 60 minutes this month for daring to question those in positions of authority over him. You might remember on Maundy Thursday I showed two segments from 60 Minutes that were really hard to watch, but that were necessary—they captured the biblical story of crucifixion—that gut wrenching, almost going to be sick feeling of evil that that story is really about. One was the story of Rene Good and Alex Preti written by Cecilia Vega and the other the story of the maximum security prison in El Salvador that many deportees have been sent to written by Sharon Alfonsi. Those of you who saw those, saw how raw and difficult those stories were. Gut wrenching reporting. And now, along with Scott Pelley, Cecilia and Sharon no longer work for 60 Minutes. One of the moments that was really poignant in his interview is when he talks about their screening of that story about Rene Good and Alex Preti, when Bari Weiss, the CEO of CBS asked if they could portray the victims as more violent. He said that Bari Weiss was quote, “Putting a thumb on the scale for the president's version of events that I felt was a level of political influence that I had never seen in 37 years at CBS News.” And when the time came where he could speak out to his superiors he says, “I looked at my friends and colleagues in the room and realized I was the senior person. ... I felt that somebody had to stand up not just for the broadcast but for the people. There are people in that room who go to war zones when they are *pregnant*.” Scott was standing up for his colleagues who did something very similar to Clara Barton—they were angels of the battlefield who put themselves in that position at great personal risk so that the rest of the world might know the truth.

He concluded by saying “CBS News is on fire.” And now, after his 36 year career there has come to a close, as he walks through the charred remains of what that fire has burnt, the remnants of the journalism that was hard hitting and impartial, that he and his colleagues put their lives at risk to bring into this world, I wonder what will be the delicate little pink crane that he finds in that rubble. In fact we might all ask that question, when this is all over, when we are walking over the burned remnants of democracy, what might we find there underneath it all, that despite everything, couldn't be burned. What will our pink crane be? Because there will be one.

The truth is, the fires of this world will burn on. As they do. But may we stop just long enough to breathe. To nourish our bodies and souls so that we might tap into that deep compassion of Jesus, to feel it in deep in our gut. To feel the labor pangs for what is about to be born. To be the angels on the battlefield who

nurse the sick back to life. To feel it so strongly, and to go where he tells us to go, to be sent out to be his hands and feet whether in Djibouti or right around the corner here at home. And to rest knowing that, in God's world, not all can be burned.

May it be so.
Amen.