

I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice

Matthew 9:9-13

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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We are about to ask you to come forward to the Lord's Table with pledges of time, talent, and treasure. You could say that we are asking you to offer them as sacrifices. But before we do that I have to tell you that sacrifices are not what God really wants. There is one verse from the prophets that Jesus quotes twice in Matthew, and it is this one: "I desire mercy, not sacrifices." Before you come to bring your sacrifices, I need to remind you that what God is really after is a change in your heart. He wants to see us show mercy the way God shows mercy. You could translate Hosea as saying that what God really wants is love. Do I still want you to bring your pledge cards? Absolutely. But as the Apostle Paul wrote, "If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing" [1 Corinthians 13:3 ASV].

It came as a bit of a shock yesterday when I got ready to read the Gospel at Father Ray Kehew's memorial service at Saint Andrew's. The text chosen to characterize Father Ray's ministry was the very one I'd been working on this week for the sermon. It was the story of the call of Matthew and the controversy that followed, which led to Jesus telling the Pharisees to go back to the prophets and figure out what it means when it says "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." The point in yesterday's service was that Father Ray understood his ministry as bringing God's mercy to sinners. The point today is that it is your ministry too.

When Jesus called Matthew to join his band of students, it was controversial because Matthew was a tax collector. The other guys were fishermen—a perfectly respectable job around Capernaum as it is around Block Island. But to be a tax collector in those days was not to work for the IRS or even the Temple Mafia; it meant you worked for the Romans. It would be like collecting taxes from Afghans to support the American army in a region where almost everybody wants us to get out. Matthew was a collaborator with the enemy. Besides that, tax collectors were considered crooks, because they were allowed to "mark up" the taxes they collected to give themselves a commission. That's how they made a living. It's hard to imagine a job in America that would make you as hated by church people—maybe someone who runs an abortion clinic. But Jesus went to this notorious sinner and said "Follow me."

That was problem enough for the religious leaders, but it turns out that it's not so much Matthew following Jesus as Jesus following Matthew. He goes to Matthew's house for a dinner party. It's understandable that this new convert was so excited that he threw a party for all of his old friends to meet his new friends and his rabbi. The place was full of notorious sinners—other guys in the tax game, and others who were the kind who would never have had anything to do with religion. And what you have to remember is that who you *ate* with was very important as a marker of Jewish piety. You couldn't eat with a Gentile. You couldn't eat with unbelievers. You couldn't eat with anyone made unclean by a disease. And you couldn't eat with known sinners, because having table fellowship with them meant that you approved of them.

But here was Jesus at a party for sinners. Some of the Pharisees approached Jesus' disciples and challenged them: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" That was that same question that leads in Luke's gospel to the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. It wasn't a petty annoyance; it was a major religious issue. The Pharisees saw it as immoral to eat with these people.

Jesus heard what they were asking, and he answered for himself. “It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” That’s an interesting response. It means that Jesus sees himself as in some ways like a doctor. He is offering healing to those who are suffering from sin. He is not just a physical healer, but he is a spiritual healer, and he’s already gotten in trouble for being an agent of mercy, offering forgiveness of sins. It also means that Jesus sees sinners as equivalent to the sick. Sinners are to be seen as victims—victims of the evil one and demonic forces, victims of unjust structures that force them into lives of sin, victims of labeling by the religious—even as they are offered the chance to change their lives, to repent. Basically, sinners are people who need healing; they are not the enemies of the faithful. You know the old line that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a private club for saints. That’s how Jesus saw what he was doing.

Then Jesus tells these religious strict-constructionists to go back to their Bibles. “Go learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” Then he defines his ministry: “For I have come not to call the righteous—that is, I haven’t come to help people who think they are already righteous; I haven’t come to help those who don’t believe they need help—instead, I have come to call sinners into a relationship with God.” Maybe for us, after centuries of Christian influence, it sounds like common sense that a preacher should spend time with sinners. That’s his target audience. But in Jesus’ time it was revolutionary. It was giving up religion in favor of love.

The Message translation renders this verse in a way that still rankles church people: “I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.” Most churches are OK with the pastor spending time building relationships with New Age poets and drummers, working on ways to help the mentally ill in the community, making friends with kids who have no use for church, even hanging out at a bar—but eventually there comes a tipping point and the church says, “You’re spending too much time with them and not enough time in the office waiting for me to call.” I haven’t hit the tipping point yet, maybe because we have so many sinners in our membership, maybe because New Englanders want to be left alone anyway. But every church has to face the question of whether the church exists for us or for them.

I want to look at that verse Jesus pointed the Pharisees to: Hosea 6:6. What does it mean to say that God wants mercy and not sacrifices? In Hosea, the people respond to a prophecy that God is going to tear their country apart by saying, “Oh, we’ll come back to God and everything will be OK.” But God says, “Not this time. Your love for me is like the fog on Block Island that burns off by midmorning. Coming back to the Temple and getting religious won’t do it. Don’t you understand what I really want? I don’t want sacrifices, even though I have commanded them. I want what underlies the sacrifices—faithful love. I want you to know me and acknowledge me.”

In the Hebrew what God says he wants is *hesed*—faithful love, steadfast love, covenant love. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament that the early church and many Jews in the first century used, that word was translated “mercy.” We can’t know what Jesus originally said since we assume that he was speaking Aramaic, close to Hebrew, but in Matthew’s gospel Hosea is quoted from the Greek and the word is “mercy.” It wouldn’t be a stretch for us to think of it as “love.” What I really want, God says, is not your crops or animals or money placed on my altar. What I really want is love. “What is the greatest commandment?” a teacher asked Jesus. You know the answer. The greatest commandment is love. Love God. Love your neighbor. That’s what God wants.

Crawford Toy was a Southern Baptist professor who got fired from the Southern Baptist seminary in the 1879 and had to settle for teaching at Harvard. I like what he said about this text

in Hosea: “What God wanted from Israel was a heart in accord with Himself.” God wanted a people who were merciful as God is merciful. And that is still what God wants.

Hosea was one of the radical poets that emerged in Israel around the 8th century B.C. calling for a return to a faithful relationship with God rather than the external practice of religion. When you read them you can see that Jesus repeated their themes in many ways. Many of the prophets said in one form or another, speaking for God, “I’m sick of the empty rituals you think please me. I care about your heart and your behavior. I care about how you treat one another.” Listen to a few examples.

In Isaiah 1, the Lord says, “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me? I have more than enough of your offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats” (v. 11). Mind you, God had commanded those things in the Torah. But they were never the point. The Lord says I’m sick of those things. Instead here is what I want: “Learn to do what is right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow” (v. 17). Put your faith to work. Don’t love in words but in deeds. The very same thing we hear in the New Testament not only from Jesus but pointedly from James and First John.

In Jeremiah 7, the prophet hears the Lord saying “When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them the command: *Obey me*, and I will be your God and you will be my people” (v. 22-23). From the beginning it was not about what you bring to the table; it was always about a covenant relationship in which you obey me.

The book of Amos is famous for his rants against religion like this one in chapter 5:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts;

your assemblies are a stench to me.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them (21-22)

But *instead*, he says:

But let *justice* roll on like a river,

righteousness like a never-failing stream (24).

What I want is not sacrifices or even worship services; what I want is justice toward fellow humans and acting rightly toward one another.

Writing about the same time, the poet-prophet Micah asked,

With what shall I come before the Lord

and bow down before the exalted God?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings

and calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?

Shall I offer my firstborn?

(Obviously he’s being ironic, and the answer is No. But here is the correct answer:)

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good:

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God (6-8).

So the same answer comes over and over. What God really wants is not your offerings. God wants the thing that is under and behind the offerings. God wants a change in our hearts and

our behavior. There are different ways that one thing God wants is expressed: justice, righteousness, obedience, mercy. And of all of those things Jesus chose mercy, or as he sometimes put it, love. And that is what Paul and John and James all picked up on. What God really want from us is love—love for God, love for one another, and love for our neighbors including the strangers.

Lord knows we need love and mercy on Block Island. Here we are, two months after civil war broke out on the island and the fires of anger are still being stoked. There are people refusing to speak to friend they've known for decades; there are board members from the medical center who get a frosty reception for members of their own congregations. I know that sometimes justice and mercy seem to be in tension, but for the prophets they were two sides of the same river. I'm in hiring mode myself right now, as we interview candidates for church secretary and mental health case manager and for putting in a new boiler. I don't think the Christian thing to do is—as some have suggested—to give the job to the person who needs it the most. We have to do the just thing and show mercy also to those who will be recipients of service; we hire the person who is best able to help us as a church to carry out our overall mission of mercy.

Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus condemns the Pharisees by telling them that they tithe even their herbs but neglect the weightier matters of the Law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (23:23). That is the challenge Jesus presents to us again today: that we ought not to neglect tithes and offerings, but remember that they are tokens of the gift of ourselves. As we come forward to this table we present not only our cards and our money; we present ourselves and ask Jesus to make us agents of his mercy and love.