

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

8 June 2008

Church of the Savior

Orange City, Iowa

The Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome, Presiding

Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching

Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Mt 9.12)

Go And Learn What This Means

The story is thin on detail: Jesus, walking through the streets of Capernaum, sees Matthew sitting at the tax office. He calls him: "*Follow me.*" Matthew gets up and follows him. We're not told why Jesus calls Matthew. Nor do we hear what motivates Matthew to follow him. We don't know if there's a back story, some previous history between Mathew and Jesus. For all we know, Jesus calls him for no reason other than his evil occupation. Matthew—in Mark and Luke he's called Levi—is a middle management cog in the cynically corrupt and oppressive machinery of Roman imperial finance. Working with the gentiles, handling coinage that bears pagan inscriptions—a scrupulous Jew would avoid even touching the Roman coins—Matthew is in a perpetual state of religious impurity, cut off from the life of Israel, the life of God. Beyond that, he's a crook, mercilessly squeezing money out of the people of Israel, inflating the tax bill and taking his cut. That makes him a despised outcast, a sinner in need of salvation, or, as Jesus will later describe him, sick and in need of a physician.

So far in the narrative of Jesus' ministry, there has been no overt conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. His warnings against hypocrites and false prophets might have been

targeted at them, and he has taught the crowds that, unless their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven (5.20). On the other hand he has declared that he has not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it; indeed, that anyone who relaxes even the least of the commandments will be least in the kingdom of heaven (5.17). It seems likely that up to this point, the Pharisees, even if suspicious of Jesus, do not yet see him as a dangerous enemy. We have no reason to think they would have disapproved of his calling the tax collector, on the assumption that he was leading him to repent and turn back to Israel's God and his law.

It's what happens next that appalls them. Mathew throws a big party so his friends, other tax collectors and "sinners," can get together with Jesus and his disciples. There's Jesus, having a good time with the scum of the earth. (It's not clear, but the term "sinners" here might even refer to gentiles, not just to Jews careless about the law.) To them it must look as though, rather than leading Matthew to the straight and narrow, Jesus has joined up with him and his wicked buddies. Instead of showing the tax collector the way to righteousness and purity, Jesus gets down and dirty with him.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' criticism does nothing to allay their suspicions. He says, "*Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick*"—something the Pharisees would agree with in the abstract, but surely they would have seen Jesus as a would be healer who has been infected with the sickness he wants to heal. Jesus goes on to tell them: "*Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*" It's an insulting response. "*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*" is a well-known

line from Hosea, but Jesus adds the “*Go and learn what this means,*” plainly implying that, while the Pharisees who object to his sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners know the prophet’s words, they don’t know what they mean. Further, with the “*Go and learn*” Jesus employs a standard rabbinic formulation, one a rabbi uses to instruct a callow, insincere student. The words “*Go and learn*” come from the great rabbi Hillel, who died when Jesus was a child, but who would have been well-known and revered in Jesus’ day. The *Talmud* records that a certain heathen approached a rabbi and said, “*Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.*” That rabbi angrily drives him away, so he comes to Hillel with the same outrageous request. Hillel tells him, “*What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.*” Thus Jesus, sitting there partying with lowlifes, insinuates that the Pharisees, who regard themselves as the learned protectors of Torah, are the ones who are clueless when it comes to what God wants. And, of course, he implies that they, the supposed defenders of Israel against idolatry, are like the people of Israel in Hosea’s day, in God’s eyes utterly unfaithful despite their religious observances.

Jesus says that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. He says it in a way that implies we cannot understand what his words mean simply by *hearing* them. We have to *go and learn*. We know what the words mean—we know what God desires—only when we go and do something. I think this connects the two (disconnected) parts of today’s reading.

Our lectionary reading omits four verses. They recount that, just as Jesus is responding to the Pharisees' criticism of him eating with Matthew and his friends, the disciples of John the Baptist turn up and start criticizing him too. "*We fast, and the Pharisees fast, so why don't your disciples?*" I imagine them looking over at Peter, Andrew, James and the others, rowdily eating and drinking with the sinners, as they piously pose their question. Jesus begins to answer them, but he is interrupted by the sudden arrival of a leader of the synagogue, a man named Jairus. He falls at Jesus' feet, tells him that his daughter has just died, and implores him to come bring her back to life. Jesus and the disciples immediately get up and follow him.

The Pharisees and the disciples of John want to pin Jesus down on matters of religious observance and purity, on questions of who to eat with and when not to eat, but Jesus walks away, responding to the distraught father, the dead child. He goes on his errand of mercy. Before he can get to her, he is interrupted again, now by the woman who suddenly reaches out of the crowd to touch Jesus, hoping to be cured of the hemorrhaging she's suffered with for a dozen years. Finally, Jesus arrives at Jairus' house. Pushing through the crowd of people telling him to go away, it's too late, he at last gets to the dead child. He takes her by the hand and gives her back her life.

The other synoptic gospels relate the same story, but it is interesting that they don't have Jairus interrupting the discussion in Capernaum; they say he encounters Jesus later, back across the Sea of Galilee. Mark and Luke also differ from Matthew's gospel in that they

have Jairus say the child is dying, not dead. The version in Matthew's gospel has a heightened sense of the urgency of human need, to which the merciful Jesus responds.

Jesus shows what it is to know what it means to say that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. In case we didn't understand when we saw Jesus at table fellowship with the sinners and tax collectors, he makes it clear: Want to know what it means, "*I desire mercy and not sacrifice?*" Go to those who need help and healing. Follow me to those who need mercy.

Feasting with the tax collectors, being touched by the bleeding woman, touching the dead child: all this renders Jesus ritually unclean. It doesn't matter. Religious purity isn't what God desires. God cares about forgiving sinners, healing the sick, raising the dead.

Still, I wonder about the contrast between mercy and sacrifice. We know that it's love for lost and hurt humanity that God desires, not the forms of moral and religious propriety. But how far can we go when it comes to *sacrifice* itself? Can we say that God, finally, rejects it? This is problematic, both retrospectively and prospectively. Looking to the past, God did, after all, institute an elaborate system of sacrifice. That imposing temple in Jerusalem, in which animals were constantly sacrificed, was God's idea, wasn't it? Do Hosea, and the other prophets who said the same sort of thing, say that God never really meant it, or that he changed his mind? On the other hand, it's not so great to think God ever really insisted that people make sacrifices to him. It's very hard to believe the God we know in Jesus was ever really like the pagan gods, demanding to be paid off

—

propitiated—by people: “*Give me a nice goat and I’ll forgive your sins this year!*”

The ancient Hebrew sacrificial scheme is notoriously complex, but there’s a way of understanding part of it—the sin offering— that I find helpful here. Although the other peoples of the ancient Near East made offerings to their gods as sacrifices as we, today, understand the term, that is, as giving away something we value in order to get something of greater value, Israel’s God introduced something that on its surface looked like the same sort of thing, but which was in essence radically different. When a Jew grievously sinned, in so doing he cut himself off from his people and ultimately God, the source of all life. He fell into a kind of death. When the “sacrificial” animal was killed, God took the animal’s life and gave it to the sinner, restoring him to life, to full communion with God and God’s people. God calls him back to his place at Israel’s table. So what was for others people giving something to God, for the people of Israel it was God giving something to his people, not people propitiating an angry deity, but the gracious God giving life to the dead. We might think of this as God “deconstructing” human religious impulses; hijacking them for his purposes. If something like this is right—I don’t know that it is but I think it ought to be—then it’s plausible that when Hosea and the other prophets denounce Israel’s confidence in its system of ritual sacrifice what’s going on is that the people have not gotten it. Like their pagan neighbors, they see God not as the gracious giver and forgiver, but as a deity they can placate, and ultimately manage, by means of their religious technology, a God they can control while going about their business, which involves all kinds of injustice. This impulse to replace God’s mercy with

human religion was, it appears, alive and well among the Pharisees who were scandalized by Jesus.

The idea that God disowns sacrifice can seem even more problematic when we look ahead, and consider the meaning of Jesus' death. It brings us up against a deep incongruity in certain kinds of Christian faith—the kind I grew up in, for instance—for they contend that this God who desires mercy, not sacrifice, also demands that human sin be paid for by the sacrifice of Jesus. Only the self-sacrifice of an innocent human being can propitiate divine justice and save us from the wrath of God. It is, I believe, a very strange kind of Christian faith that, at the end of the day, portrays Jesus as saving us from *God*. There are things we very desperately need saving from, but God is not one of them. God is the savior, not he from whom we need saving.

This does not mean we should not understand Jesus as sacrificing himself for us. Surely he does, but not in the way the Pharisees, or those Hosea prophesized against, understood. He does not die to placate affronted divine justice. God's justice, God's righteousness, is precisely God's faithfulness to people, his commitment to saving us no matter what, saving us even despite ourselves. To say God is just just *is* to say that God is merciful, that God saves. Jesus dies, and there we see what the ancient rites of Hebrew sacrifice symbolized: God gives us his life. When sacrifice is seen rightly, there is no space between mercy and sacrifice. What we are given in Jesus crucified is exactly God's relentless mercy. God gives his life for us and shows us his mercy, calling us to

share in it, both by receiving it and by being merciful to one another. Go and learn what it means.

Amen.