

*Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26*  
*4 Pentecost*  
*8 June 2008*  
*Church of Our Saviour, Charlottesville*  
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A few years ago, after officiating at a wedding, I was looking for a seat at the reception. It was a formal, sit-down kind of affair, and everyone was assigned to a table. When I finally found mine and took a seat, a couple at the table looked at me with undisguised horror. The woman turned to her date and said (quietly, but not quietly enough), "Great. We have to sit next to the priest." I don't know what they thought I was going to do — ask them how often they went to church, maybe, or just glower at them with disapproval while I sipped prune juice or something. The mischievous part of me was tempted to take out a Bible and volunteer to read Scripture to them while they ate. They clearly expected me to ruin all their fun. They were just one of many people I've met over the years who view religious people in general, and clergy in particular, as grim, judgmental and decidedly unpleasant to be around.

Perhaps over the centuries we've too often earned that reputation, but if so, we have wandered far from Jesus Christ. Jesus obviously enjoyed spending time with people, attending banquets, dinner parties, and weddings. And apparently he was a welcome guest. People liked having him around. We aren't told what exactly happened at this dinner with tax collectors and other assorted sinners, but presumably he didn't rail at them about how they were all going to hell. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus has a remarkable ability to love people where they're at, even if he doesn't always approve of their behavior. Wherever he is, and whomever he's with, Jesus finds a way to reveal God's love, to show God's care. And that alone is transformational: Matthew the tax collector is just one example of someone who encounters Jesus and is forever changed.

In fact, Jesus is very clear that his mission is to reach out with God's love to everyone who is broken or hurting. He didn't come, he says, for self-righteous folks who don't think they need any help: he came for sinners, for outcasts, and for all those who know how much they need God's grace in their lives. So he's happy to spend time with these despised tax collectors. He's not there to condemn them; he's there to save them. And he's happy to encounter sick people. He's not put off by this woman with the hemorrhage, who is technically unclean, whom he's not supposed to touch or talk to. He's happy to go to the house of that little girl who died. He doesn't turn away from the pain of it, doesn't get bogged down in questions like, "Why would God let a child die?" — questions that can quickly put us into a spiritual funk. He's there to show God's presence and love in the midst of it all, and he never wavers in that mission.

And we who call him Lord cannot simply admire him from a distance. What he says to those grim and judgmental Pharisees he says to us: *Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* Mercy, God's compassion for a fallen world, is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and at the heart of all truly Christian faith. Religious sacrifices and observances

have value only insofar as they help us experience that mercy ourselves and express that mercy to others. It's a lesson Jesus lived and died to teach us.

And the ones who get it are always the ones who have a lively awareness of their own need for mercy. Self-righteous people have a hard time with mercy: it's the people who acknowledge their sins and accept God's forgiveness who begin to grasp it. Self-sufficient people have a hard time with mercy: it's the people who ask for God's strength, God's comfort, God's peace to hold them up who begin to grasp it. Hardship and tragedy can put us in touch with our need for mercy, but it's there even when we aren't suffering terribly. At the deepest level, each one of us wants to know that we belong in this world, that our life has meaning and value no matter what happens to us. We try to instill that in our children, we want them to feel that; it's what we need ourselves as God's children. Christ meets us at that very point and assures us of that very thing. For those who realize it, those who accept it, we are continually immersed in mercy; we swim in God's mercy like a fish swims in the sea.

If you've personally experienced that mercy, you know this. If you've never experienced it, then it's worth asking for. For when we've felt it in our own lives, we can more readily and more effectively share it with others. After all, Jesus commissioned his disciples to carry on his ministry, his work of mercy. Our parish mission statement reflects this: *Growing a community in Christ . . . Sharing Christ's love with the world.* We try to share that love in lots of ways, through various outreach ministries and programs, all of them good. But the most powerful way of sharing Christ's love here is not located in our food closet, the thrift shop, or the church check book. The most powerful means of sharing that love is sitting in our pews right now. You and I, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are the primary ways Christ will continue his work of mercy today.

All of us will encounter people this week who are angry, hurt, sick, depressed, lonely, or stressed out. All of us will interact with people who need mercy, or hear about people who need mercy. Those people are our mission field. If Christ is going to touch them, it may well be through us — or not at all. We can't fix everyone's problems, but we can listen to them, pray for them, help them, love them. We can extend to them some of the mercy we have experienced in our own lives. And then maybe they can see in us the face of Christ. I can't imagine a greater privilege than serving others in such a way. And certainly I can't think of a better way of responding to those challenging words in our Gospel today: *Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."*