

The Quality of Mercy

Menno Mennonite Church

June 11, 2023

Purpose: To explore the desire for mercy, not sacrifice.

Message: Jesus invites those who follow him into the practice of mercy, demonstrating the way of God to all around.

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26 (I will read); Hosea 6:1-6 {Please read}

Synopsis: The miracles of the bible are bold demonstrations of the power of God. They speak to the way God works in the world. As amazing as they are, the context of who receives the miracles and the way that they are delivered speak even more loudly to the way that God works in the world. The people for whom Jesus acts are not the *right* people. They are gentiles, Tax Collectors, the unclean. As he goes and teaches the desire of mercy versus sacrifice he demonstrates the acceptance of all as they have need. He responds to those who are in front him without the retribution and expectations of law. Jesus implements mercy, and invites us to do the same.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

⁹As Jesus was walking along,
he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth;
and he said to him, "Follow me."
And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house,
many tax collectors and sinners came
and were sitting with him and his disciples.

¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples,
"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹²But when he heard this, he said,
"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

¹⁸While he was saying these things to them,
suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in
and knelt before him, saying,

"My daughter has just died;
but come and lay your hand on her,
and she will live."

¹⁹And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

²⁰Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages
for twelve years came up behind him
and touched the fringe of his cloak,

²¹for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak,
I will be made well."

²²Jesus turned, and seeing her he said,
"Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."
And instantly the woman was made well.

²³When Jesus came to the leader's house
and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion,

²⁴he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping."
And they laughed at him.

²⁵But when the crowd had been put outside,
he went in and took her by the hand,
and the girl got up.

²⁶And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Miracles are hard to ignore. I mean they are miracles—the same-old-same-old law of nature with which are way too familiar are put on pause long enough for those in desperate human need to be rescued to new life and living. They are headline making stuff and have the way of marking our experience with the Bible. We learn the miracles as Sunday School lessons because it teaches so much about the nature and identity of the savior. Besides, the stories are meant for telling. Like the time where the paralytic seeking healing just needed to find a way in and repels from the ceiling? How cool is that? Later, it is occasionally these very miracles that people can turn to in arguing themselves out of faith. Unable to explain what happened rationally, and unwilling to consider embracing them merely as faith alone, the reasoning is “well, then, it just can’t be.” This might not be many of us here, but these are conversations that I have certainly had walking with people struggling with their faith in light of how they think about the world and what is and is not possible. Miracles are not always good news to everyone involved.

This is true today and it was true in Jesus’ day. I have often wondered about what, exactly do we do with miracles as we apply them to our day-to-day faith. They are excellent proofs of who Jesus is and what Jesus can do and the power he represents. They inspire us to look for the same movement of God in our world today. Sometimes I think we miss those movements when we look so specifically for instances of God’s work that we miss the generally miraculous. Take for example the simple fact the long nuclear arms race that threatened us all for decade never came to its seemingly inevitable conclusion. When you read some of the stories of how close things did become, hinging on the logic of one individual to not follow through to destruction, it is hard not to think it miraculous. Absent these views of the present miracles (they are there) we often are brought back to these workings of Jesus as good facts and fantastic happenings but things that generally don’t change how we live our immediate lives of faith. Yet I think there are things that we can and should learn from these stories and it is not necessarily found in analyzing the miracle to make sure that we know how they work. Instead there is teaching going on here too.

Matthew’s gospel is organized in a particular way. Each gospel writer tells the story in their way for their own good reasons. Matthew sets out to explain the messiah to those expecting him. This passage of calling and miracles is positioned within a larger section recounting Jesus’ miraculous work. More broadly, it comes in the section that seems to speak about what Jesus did

to those who would read. Were you to read the whole of Matthew, you might notice a pattern. It starts out explaining who Jesus is, situating him in his genealogy and speaking to his birth. Then we have the baptism confirming and concluding the early years of the life and time. It is not long until we turn to what Jesus taught, with the Sermon on the Mount chief among it coming right after. With that teaching comes the demonstration of who he is and forces arrayed against Jesus and his way, with the conflict that follows. It ends as we sat with last week with the disciples continuing that story on to the rest of the world.

I go through this to draw your attention to this: pay attention here to the people receiving the miracles and hearing the call to come and follow. They are not, strictly, the usual cast of characters. He calls Matthew to come and follow from his very booth where he was engages in collecting the taxes that put him well outside the community that saw him as unclean at best, a greedy traitor at worst. He heals the hemorrhaging woman as he goes along the way, reaching out again to one who was not only on the outside, but was trying her very best to remain invisible to the world around her. Yet it is to this daughter that health is returned by the simple brush of his hem. He finally comes to the Synagogue leader's home to heal one past healing and to put himself in front of the crowds to tell them what they knew to be impossible. He makes himself a laughing stock.

All of this serves, I think, to teach us something about the nature of the teacher who is doing the calling. You have heard me say more than once that Matthew's Gospel is largely written for an insider audience. Throughout the story he refers to the Hebrew scriptures implicitly and explicitly. Jesus frequently connections to the prophecy of Isaiah and the looking toward the suffering servant described there. The names Matthew uses for Jesus—Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David—draw on the language of salvation as the Jewish tradition would know it.

But for being such a Son of David Jesus goes out of his way to bring outsiders in. He encounters the world and does so fully. He engages gentiles, the oppressor and the oppressed, the righteous and the unrighteous. This calling of Matthew the tax collector (not likely, it should be noted, Matthew the author) was yet one more of these encounters. A tax collector beyond being supremely unpopular for all the obvious and common reasons (I am guessing the IRS recruitment brochure doesn't put "make new friends" to high on the list of reasons to sign up) but was also perpetually unclean. By reason of his profession he was continually in contact with

gentiles and gentiles goods and that made him every bit as unclean as the woman reaching out in the street (a connection I really had not noticed previously). Yet he is given the endorsement of being simply invited to follow—and he does. Not that simplicity is always easy, but coming and following is a good deal better than becoming clean before you can ever even be considered.

All of this connects one to the next to make the story whole. As important as the miracles here accomplished—and I am inclined to include Matthew's rehabilitation in that list—I think these miracles teach beyond themselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus articulates the kingdom of God in his teaching, reaching out to something bigger than anyone had previously imagined. In these miracle chapters he demonstrates the characteristics of what the kingdom was to be and how it was to function in reality and truth. When the pharisees question this new way he returns to the deep tradition to ask them to go back and look again at what it means to love like YHWH God. As the story unfolds it seems that Jesus is not much concerned with matters of insiders and outsiders, clean and unclean. He goes about touching lepers, healing Gentiles, and eating with sinners and tax collectors. Any one of these could be seen as a violation of expectations and codes concerning purity. Jesus is concerned rather with the weightier matters of the law which have mostly to do with mercy and compassion. He quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Something new is going on here that calls for "fresh wineskins" (9:17).

He expands the Hosea quote with the sending of the pharisees to go and learn the meaning of "I desire mercy." In that one sentence Jesus places himself in conflict with the law sacrificial system and anyone who would position themselves as the purveyor of grace. The law offer reconciliation to God and neighbor through the retribution and sacrifice (the classic eye for and eye equivalence of which we are all fond). Mercy, the quality that Jesus is offering and demonstration is based on the foundation of compassion and forgiveness. At the same time, Jesus demonstrates, mercy facilitates restoration, repentance and wholeness. Mercy acknowledges the priority of the mercy above all else. As he goes about these healings of the woman and then the daughter who is dead (notice that he takes her by the hand here. Touching the dead was another means of uncleanness) he is taking on risk. As much as we might think otherwise, these were not meaningless regulations, but were meant to protect health the community. Jesus does not protect himself but extends himself for those in need of healing. He does this not because ritual purity is unimportant but because ritual purity cannot stand in the

way of the demands of mercy and compassion. That is the fulfillment of the law Jesus is talking about as he teaches on the mount and the fulfillment of the law that he demonstrates now.

The quality of the kingdom is the quality of mercy. Shouldn't it be that way? I think we can all think about those times where we have done wrong in our lives. Big or small, it doesn't take long for us to enumerate our sins, or at least I should say it doesn't me. Think about the consequences of those times and compare those times that were characterized by retribution and those by mercy. Which set has known better outcomes? Where has healing been more fully embraced? Where has the miracle of human connection been able to be restored or maintained? How does one compare to the next? For me they quite simply don't.

Merciful Jesus does not badger or berate the Pharisees, he simply responds to the need. On the journey, another with a need reaches them, and again, mercy flows from Jesus with healing power. No sacrifices were necessary. No rites or rituals were engaged; faith did the work. Finally, Jesus reaches the girl and takes her hand. Mercy lifts her up.

Mercy is not about being fair. It is being Christ like and choosing love, compassion, and faithfulness as the Spirit allows us to do so. It is this mercy that brought Christ into the world and mercy sends us out into the world to embrace, embody and proclaim the Kingdom of God. May this be our good news and our ongoing challenge as we seek together that kingdom. Amen.