

## **Mercy**

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Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26

It's about who's in and who's out, this story. It's about who's really, you know, an acceptable person and who's not. And it's about what makes someone acceptable or not. It's an important thing to know, of course, for ourselves. Sometimes we spend quite a lot of time in church sorting that all out, don't we. There was once a church in Georgia where the chairman of the board proposed at the annual meeting that they have keys made and give each family a key to the church. They should otherwise keep it locked because, he said, "You don't know who can come in the church." You don't know what some people might do to the church.

It's true. And, you know, how are you going to have family if you don't make it clear who's not family? No shoes, no shirt, no service. It's about that, this gospel story. Because, you see, Matthew had forfeited his right to be called family. In becoming a tax collector, he had willfully stopped acting in the ways that family act toward one another. His family, the Jewish people living in and around Galilee at the time, were by and large subsistence farmers, or living at a subsistence level, for the most part, whether they were farmers, or fishermen, or, some kind of craftsman. So, to become a tax collector, someone who padded their own pocket by collecting more than the allotted tax and keeping the profit, was a betrayal of family. And besides that, these were not family who were ruling over them. The Romans weren't the people of God. They didn't acknowledge God, and so, by definition they were not family. They were unacceptable, unholy, deficient. And Matthew was working for *them*. He had forfeited his right to be called family. By working for them, he had made himself like them, unclean, unholy, unacceptable.

So, it must have been quite a shock that Jesus called Matthew to be part of his family, in fact, part of the inner circle of his family, part of the twelve. What in the world was this Jewish rabbi doing? It's what the Pharisees wanted to know. "Why does your rabbi eat with tax collectors and sinners?" It's a fair enough question, really. Because they were concerned with holiness. They took their faith seriously. They had spent much of their lives trying to grapple with how their family, the Jews, could possibly live a holy life in a culture where people who weren't part of their family set the rules? How do you live a holy life in a culture where the people of God are not in control? How do you keep from becoming incapable of truly worshipping the God you know to be God, simply because you're a part of the surrounding culture? It's a very legitimate concern, and so they were trying to figure out ways for people to be able to keep the law, ways for the family to still know what made it a family, a people set apart. You can understand how Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, and inviting them to be part of his family would not seem to be helping.

It's still a problem. Like that chairman of the board said, you just don't know who can come in the church. And a lot of people aren't what we'd like them to be, are they? Fred Craddock tells the story of a family that lived up the street from him, divorced and left three or four youngsters, girls, one of them attractive, prematurely mature, and about fourteen years old. She was truant at school, into marijuana, always in trouble, always up before the judge, chasing around and hanging on the tail end of every motorcycle that went roaring through the neighborhood. She was finally so truant and so involved in misdemeanors that the judge said, "You're going to reform school in southern Oklahoma." She was sent away to a detention home for girls. About the fourth or fifth month that she was there, she gave birth to the child she was carrying. She was fifteen at the time.

Well, word came to the neighborhood some months afterward that she was coming home. "Will she have that baby with her?" "Is she really coming back home, back to our neighborhood?" Says Craddock, the day they heard she was to come, all of them in the neighborhood had to

mow their grass. They were out in their yards, mowing their grass, and watching the house. She didn't show, nobody came, and they kept watching the house and mowing the grass. Craddock says he was down to about one blade at a time, you know, watching the house, when a car pulled in the driveway—and out stepped...“It's Cathy. She has the baby. She brought home the baby.” People in her house ran out and grabbed her and took turns holding that baby, and they were all laughing and joking, then they went in. And then another car pulled in, then another one pulled in, and then another. They started parking in the street. You couldn't have gotten a Christian car down the street, just cars on either side, and they're all gathering there, you know.

Craddock says suddenly he got disturbed and anxious and went in his house. It had suddenly struck him, what if one of them saw him down in the yard and said, “Hey Fred, she's home and she has the baby. We're giving a party, and we'd like for you and Nettie to come.” And well, you know how it is. I mean, you're just not sure you really want to associate with some people. People aren't who we'd like them to be. And it remains a question we keep dealing with doesn't it, about just where the lines are if we are to be holy, if we are to live faithful lives in a culture doesn't really know Jesus.

Can we as Americans *not* be materialistic consumers? Can we as Americans, practice love of enemies? The church today still struggles with that question and has answered it many different ways, from the pretty much complete withdrawal from the culture of the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, to all types of accommodation here but not there to the culture. And it's all finally because a lot of people aren't who we'd like them to be.

Well, you remember, Jesus answers the Pharisees question about why he eats with tax collectors and sinners. He says: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, (a Savior) but those who are sick.” And quoting Hosea, he continues, “Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice.' For I have come to call *not* the righteous, but sinners.” You see, Jesus shares the Pharisees concerns for living a holy life. He just has completely different grounds for what constitutes a holy life. Says Jesus, holiness is mercy. And mercy begins with identifying with the unclean, becoming one with sinners, becoming one with the broken and the inadequate and those who aren't what we'd like them to be.

And what Jesus recognized is that that ability to become one with the broken and inadequate comes from knowing yourself to be broken and inadequate, knowing yourself to be not what you'd like to be. So, in order to form this new family whose defining mark is to be forgiveness, he had to start with people who knew themselves to be in need of forgiveness. He had to start with the sick and the lame and the blind, because it was assumed all of that was because of sin and impurity. He had to start with lepers and prostitutes and sinners and tax collectors like Matthew, who because he believed that Jesus really did have the authority to forgive him, got up and followed.

The Pharisees were ill too, of course. It's just that their illness consisted in thinking that they were well. And so, they could not become one with sinners, because they were too busy denying that inadequacy and unholiness in themselves. The other two stories in today's Gospel lesson, the woman with the flow of blood for twelve years, as well as the synagogue leader's daughter are both about Jesus not being afraid to be made unclean, not being afraid to touch and to be touched by the unclean. They know themselves in need and he brings healing mercy to them, completely identifying with them, identifying with the unclean.

At a church in Montana, they have a Sunday School class called the Joy Class. For the most part, the congregation welcomes the members of the Joy Class when they decide to join the church. See, the Joy Class has all kinds of people, but the curriculum is designed for adults with developmental disabilities. Some of the disabilities are verbal. Some of the folks are difficult to understand, others can communicate little more than yes and no. So, when Ina, blind,

wheelchair-bound, and mildly retarded, joined the church by reaffirmation of faith, reciting Scripture in front of the congregation at her own request, most of the people stopped at the door after worship to welcome her. Those who didn't rushed past with a glance at Ina, knowing that she could not see them slip by. The pastor when he got home asked his wife, "What are they afraid of?" And his wife, hitting the nail right on the head, replied, "That this is who we are now." Not middle to upper middle-income people at prayer, but the blind, the lame, and the outcast.

Friends, it is, isn't it? It *is* who we are in Jesus Christ. We are the broken, the unclean, the inadequate, scapegoaters who think we are not ill, sinners chronically unable to follow our Lord, in so many ways we are just not who we'd really like to be. And Jesus identifies with us. Jesus says: mercy. Jesus says, "Follow me." Learn to show mercy. Jesus says: take my hand and rise up from the death of your life. Jesus says: take heart, your faith that I can forgive even you, has made you well. Jesus says, I became sin; I completely identify with you and I forgive you. Mercy. Friends, there's enough of that for you and for me and for all.  
Mercy.

Amen.