

sermon-6/8/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Mercy Trumps Religion”
Matt. 9:9-13, 18-26

You are what you eat. That has become a popular saying in our health conscious culture. It is a good piece of advice. We should be careful what we put into our bodies. No one wants to become junk because of eating too much junk food.

One commentator said in biblical times they had a bit of a different saying. Instead of you are what you eat, they would say you are who you eat with. Consequently any respectable person would not want to spend time eating with anyone considered unclean. If you did eat with them you became unclean yourself.

These table rules were a way for the religious leaders in that day to have control over people. If you could exclude some because they were seen as religiously unclean, you could ruin their life. The threat of becoming unclean by associating with those who were already excluded, was also a powerful tool of control.

Jesus was not intimidated. He was constantly eating with those who were not kosher. Our passage for today is one more example of that. Here he is eating with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees can't understand it. They ask his disciples why he would do such a thing. Jesus response was direct and unapologetic. Only those who recognize they are sinners welcome me. If you think you are righteous then you don't need me. If you think your religious sacrifices please God more than mercy, you are sorely mistaken.

This passage in Matthew is all about the excluded becoming included. Matthew does not give us easy examples in his discussion. Let us look at the three offered in our text and ponder what this means for us.

The first excluded person was a tax collector named Matthew. It is not certain if this was the author of this gospel. It is certain that a tax collector was a despicable person. Basically tax collectors were traitors. They worked for Rome collecting the onerous taxes put on an occupied people by their occupier.

Tax collectors often over-charged people so they could make a profit themselves. It would be hard to come up with a modern day example of someone as hated as this tax collector. Jesus was on very shaky ground choosing Matthew to be a disciple, let alone eating with him. Some scholars feel it was Jesus' table fellowship with outcasts that was the most radical thing he did, and what eventually got him killed. Such practices undermined the power the included had over the excluded.

Because the tax collector was considered ritually unclean, he was not allowed in the Temple or the synagogue. He was denied access to God, in other words. Jesus says in his kingdom we don't exclude people. In fact, it is those who know they are sinners who are most welcome in God's kingdom. By eating with him, Matthew is saying this

outcaste is given direct access to God, in Christ, even more than those respectable folks who worship in the Temple or synagogue.

The next excluded person we encounter is the woman with a hemorrhage. She has been bleeding for twelve years. That means she was excluded from society because of her medical situation. She, too, was ritually unclean. She was not supposed to be out in public, let alone touching a person like Jesus. She risks some pretty harsh consequences by mingling with the crowd so she can get to Jesus.

Interestingly, Jesus stops what he is doing to connect with her. Jesus had been on an urgent mission to deal with a leader of the synagogue's daughter. This poor woman who had been hemorrhaging would not have been welcome in that leader's synagogue. Yet Jesus treats her as just as important as this respectable man. The life of this woman was every bit in need of saving as was the leader's daughter.

And when she touches Jesus a surprising thing happens. Instead of Jesus becoming unclean because of this contact with an unclean person, the woman becomes clean. Her bleeding stops. She is restored to community. The healing that happens here is on many levels. The phrase "made well" captures these various levels. She was healed in body, but also socially. She was no longer isolated. The excluded one is now welcome to become part of the included.

The final excluded one is the daughter of this leader of the synagogue. By the time Jesus gets to her she is dead. That makes her definitively excluded. Not only is she not able to be a part of the community because she is no longer living, but she is now unclean because she is a corpse. Jesus would become unclean if he touched her.

Instead, when Jesus took her by the hand, she rises to new life. The stink of death has been replaced by new possibilities. She can now be included in the community. No one is too excluded for Jesus not to be able to include them. Not even death is an obstacle for God, in Christ.

Obviously, if we are to be the Church today, if we are to be the body of Christ, we, too, need to be about reaching out to the excluded in our society and including them in our fellowship. That has its own challenges.

But there is a deeper message going on in this passage. It is centered around Jesus saying, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." That is a statement worth contemplating. What does Jesus mean by that?

Sacrifice here is the animal sacrifice done in the Temple. It was at the heart of their most sacred worship services. It was a religious act. No doubt those services in the Temple were filled with pomp and circumstance. They probably were beautifully done. The music must have been stirring.

But, Jesus says, if your life does not exhibit mercy, compassion, loyalty to my way of living, however you want to put it, those religious services mean nothing. If you think you can please God by putting on wonderful worship services; if you think you can earn your way into heaven because of your attendance at worship, even if going is a chore you bravely endure, you are missing the point.

As one scholar put it, when Jesus talks about sacrifice here he is talking about our thinking “we have something to give that changes the divine scales in our favor.” Jesus says that is nonsense. We don’t earn God’s love by our religion or our religious practices. God is far more interested in how we live our lives the rest of the week, in how we show mercy or compassion to others.

We need to be careful here. We don’t earn our salvation by doing acts of mercy. We do acts of mercy because God has reached out to us and included us in the community we call the Church. Our reaching out to others to include them is our grateful response to having been included by God.

Those who see this have a very different reason for going to worship. We go to worship because we know we need each other to sustain our acts of mercy. It has nothing to do with pleasing God, earning God’s favor, putting stars in our crowns so we can get to heaven. Worship has everything to do with being nurtured so we can sustain a life of grateful faithfulness.

We go to worship to remind ourselves what is truly important in this life we all share. We go to worship to be challenged to live out our faith in ever more faithful ways. We go to worship to clear our eyes so we might see God in the midst of our days the rest of the week. We go to worship because we need each other.

The dead girl in this story is the ultimate example of this point Matthew is trying to make. She can do nothing to earn God’s favor. God, in Jesus, reaches out to her and brings her new life. In many ways we are all dead to sin. God reaches out to us. We miss recognizing God if we don’t acknowledge we are in need of healing. If we think we are righteous, like the good religious folks in Jesus’ day, we exclude ourselves from being a disciple of Jesus.

May our worship in this place remind us of that. May it empower us to be merciful. May it open us to a grace so radical not even death can prevent us from experiencing it. Amen