

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 11, 2023

HOSEA 5:15–6:6 | PSALM 50:7-15 | ROMANS 4:13-25 | MATTHEW 9:9-13

Maybe you've had that experience where you find a new song that you really love. Let's say, "Landslide" by the Dixie Chicks or "Time After Time" by Iron & Wine. You listen to it on repeat (and so do your neighbors). You memorize all the words. Maybe you learn how to play it on piano or guitar. And then you text your friend about this great new song you discovered. And your friend will inevitably reply, "You know that's a cover, right?" And even though you didn't know, you say, "Yea, I know." And what happens when you go and find that original song? It doesn't lessen your enjoyment, but it actually helps you listen for something new.

There's something like that going on in today's gospel reading. Jesus is eating with a group of tax collectors and sinners when a group of Pharisees start hassling his disciples. *Why does your teacher eat with these people?*

Perhaps because Matthew has been a disciple for all of five minutes and isn't equipped to answer this question, Jesus responds before the disciples can. "I desire mercy," he says, "not sacrifice." It's a great line. The kind of line that only Jesus could have come up with. It is also—I'm obliged to tell you—a cover.

We heard the original version in today's first reading from Hosea. This reading is a conversation between the people of Israel and God. The people, who have frequently turned away from God and been unfaithful to the covenant, decide to repent and change their ways. "Let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn," they say. "He will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth." And while God welcomes this return, God also anticipates that this newfound devotion won't last for long. The people's "love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early." They will make a big hoopla of their return, but then get bored and go back to their old habits.

What does God desire instead? "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice." What God wants is for the people to be faithful, reliable, and trusting in their relationship with God. Not just fleeting moments of devotion but a lasting relationship. What Hosea calls "steadfast love," we might call compassion. Being present with each other not just when things are fun when things are difficult as well.

That puts Jesus's words in a slightly different light. So often, when we think about mercy, our minds immediately start thinking about punishment and harm. If a prisoner asks to be shown mercy, they're asking to have their punishment lessened. If a high school sports game is getting too one-sided, the officials will invoke the mercy rule. Mercy is about the absence of something. And you could imagine taking that kind of logic and reading it into today's gospel reading. That Jesus is here to judge and punish tax collectors and sinners, but he's doing us a real favor by giving us a break and holding back.

But that doesn't explain why Jesus wants to be at table with this group of people. If mercy is just about not punishing people, Jesus could just ignore them. But keep that Hosea reading in mind as you hear Jesus's words. Why does your teacher eat with sinners and tax collectors? Because he desires compassion. Because Jesus is not interested in quick fixes or technocratic solutions. Jesus wants to understand people's lives. Mercy is not about the absence of something but presence. Jesus wants to spend time *with* people. Face to face. Heart to heart. Life to life.

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We see that in every encounter Jesus has in today's gospel reading. This reading seems like a random assortment of stories, but there is a theme running below the surface. Read the story this way. Jesus is eating a meal when the Pharisees interrupt him to question his disciples. After answering them, a leader from the synagogue interrupts and asks Jesus to see his daughter. While Jesus is on the way to this man's daughter, a woman interrupts him by touching his cloak. And when Jesus finally arrives at the house, his entrance is interrupted by the crowd who laughs at him. It's just one interruption after the next.

But through all these interruptions, Jesus always responds compassionately, as if this person's situation were the most important thing in the world. Jesus doesn't say, "Twelve years of blood isn't bad compared to someone's who's dead." Or, "If she's dead, I can get around to this later." He acknowledges each person's life as something of the utmost importance. He offers steadfast love. He opens his heart to the world and frees us to do the same.

There's a beautiful passage in Samuel Wells's book on ministry where he puts it this way. He's talking about ordained ministry, but this part can apply to all of us. Encountering people with compassion means that "it may not be the right time for you, but it's always the right time for me... I will never make light of your struggles. I will never tell you something more interesting actually happened to me. I will never say 'I know' when you're exploring a feeling for the first time. I will never change the subject when you bring up something that's hard to hear."¹

What do you notice missing from that list? There is nothing in that list about having sage advice. Or knowing exactly what to say. Or having a neat solution to every problem. Sometimes it feels like we have nothing to offer other people except our hearts. But as Jesus reminds us, sometimes that's the most valuable thing we have to offer.

It can be easy for us to forget that. As many of you know, this congregation has participated in the Wyckoff Love Fund for close to twenty-five years. And Pat Khanjian from St. Elizabeth's and I typically handle the intake of new clients. That's typically about a dozen per year. This past year as some of the covid relief started expiring, that number went way up. Sometimes I was getting four per day. I'd come in on Sunday and have half a dozen new requests from the weekend.

And one day, we had a meeting here with someone who had asked for help, and I was running around making copies of bills and trying to keep track of paperwork. *What's the income? What's the rent? When's the bill due?* And Pat comes into my office, introduces herself, sits down, makes herself comfortable like she's going to be there for a while, and says, "Tell me about how you're doing."

To perceive the difference between mercy and compassion is the beginning of wisdom. To pass from the surface to the depths of another's life is the beginning of communion. And to understand holy interruptions as the means of grace is the beginning of ministry. This day, Jesus invites each of us to follow him on this way. "Come and learn."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 16.