

Proper 5A: Matthew 9.9-13; 18-26

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"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" Did Jesus's blunt instruction burn through the fog of anybody else's Sunday morning today?

A lot is going on in our gospel reading. A new disciple is called and follows. There's grumbling about Jesus's questionable choices in friends and his memorable comment about well people not needing doctors. A leader of the synagogue asks Jesus to raise his daughter from the dead. And as they're on their way to the house where he will do just that, a woman touches the hem of Jesus's cloak and gets healed.

It's a busy scene, isn't it? And yet, every time I read it, I feel like Jesus pauses in the midst of all that bustle, looks up, and says, "You. Yeah, you. I want you to go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" Well, this week, I read it while Ardelle and I were in Atlanta with our youth director Jeremy and seven of Calvary's young people. We were visiting a place called Mercy Church.

The timing was very inconvenient. I was hoping for divine acknowledgement of the sacrifices we just endured. For someone my age, sleeping on a cheap mattress on a gym floor for a week feels like an act of self denial that could have moved a lost soul right through purgatory once upon a time. Add to that that lights out was at the ungodly hour of—get this—10:30 p.m.! You can see that I'd gathered up a nice little collection of personal sacrifices to show off, only to hear that they're of no interest at all to God. Mercy is what catches God's attention. Mercy, not sacrifice, is what God desires.

Mercy Church describes itself as "a grassroots, ecumenical, open and affirming congregation that meets in the basement of a big church on a busy street in the heart of Atlanta... We believe that God desires life, health, dignity, and sanctuary for us all. Whether you are in housing or not, whether you live in our neighborhood or come from far away, whether you love the church or have ever felt left out, we want to welcome you... as we work to build one another up in beloved community."

It seems worth noting that, while life can be very hard at times for pretty much everyone at Mercy Church, sacrifice is nowhere to be found in its self-description. It at least aspires to be a community built up from the abundance of gifts that the people who gather in that church basement bring to its table.

Let me describe Mercy Church in a little more detail before we dig deeper into what Jesus told us to go and learn.

It was founded eighteen years ago by Pastor Chad, who wears cowboy boots, matching Wrangler jacket and jeans, and a big straw Stetson. The silver buckle on his belt is so big I don't know how sits down in a chair. But it bears the image of the Virgin

Mary, the only visible evidence that your first impression might be incomplete. Pastor Chad becomes only more complex when you learn that he got the call to found this scrappy little ministry while on clergy staff at a Pentecostal megachurch. Although you might have guessed the Pentecostal part by the way he turns declarative sentences into questions by adding “amen” at the end. As in, “The grits Jim stirred up this morning are perfect, amen?”

Ask one of our youth about Mercy Church, and you’ll probably hear about folks like Upunga, a gentle Kenyan who rode out Hurricane Harvey in the back of an open semi trailer in Houston, then took the Red Cross up on a free Greyhound ticket to Atlanta the next day. Or Daniel, who was commending his worn copy of Richard III to one of the youth leaders from Texas when I met him and who told me he loves James Weldon Johnson and Maya Angelou as well. I was amazed at how immediately our young people understood that Kristy was not laughing historically at them, but at voices no one heard but her, as we prayed the rosary with two Sisters of Charity one morning. And the kids all listened so attentively and followed instructions so carefully as a neighbor named Doug, who may have slept outside the night before, showed them how to make meatloaf for 70.

Of course, we have our own collection of eccentrics at Calvary, on staff, in the congregation, and in our neighborhood. Every human community, large or small, is unique. But, if Jesus is to be trusted, I wonder if a challenge that all human communities share is how to make mercy its defining feature rather than sacrifice. The saying came from Hosea, so it was already 700 years old when Jesus spoke it. I happen think it’s still a helpful lens to look at things through all these centuries later.

Which may be why I learned just was much watching the youth from Calvary and those from Round Rock Presbyterian make community among themselves. I got to see how they navigated risk and insecurities, shame and vulnerability. I saw them display the courage and kindness all community making requires. New friends tended to old wounds and to fresh hurts in each other, made mistakes and asked forgiveness, established boundaries and pulled down barriers. Perhaps the gift of traveling to another place with other people is mostly in seeing the dynamics that are always in play when we make community. Or, to use a notion I preached about a few weeks ago, to see the liturgy of our life together in this liturgical cosmos with fresh eyes.

We noted earlier that Matthew 9 is a busy chapter, with the calling of Matthew, the raising of a child, and the healing of a woman’s long struggle with hemorrhages. There are even flute players and a crowd of mourners who laugh at Jesus when he tells them the dead girl is only sleeping. The story is more populated, than personal. So personal piety doesn’t seem to be the point. Perhaps Jesus is telling each of us to pay attention to the communities we form and inhabit, when he says: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

It's been fifteen years since the publication of a book by Peter Block titled *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. In it, he doesn't use the language of mercy and sacrifice explicitly, but he talks a lot about communities of abundant gifts and transactional communities of scarcity. And he said communities of scarcity frame their challenges in terms of solving problems rather than restoring community that has broken down.

Think about this for a moment. Think about your family or about Calvary or about Memphis and think about how we frame our challenges. Do we talk about problems like violence and poverty and climate change and crime and homelessness? I think all of us — left, right and center — tend to see the world as a set of problems to be solved in a world of scarce resources.

Peter Block says this: "Holding on to the view that community is a set of problems to be solved holds us in the grip of retribution. At every level of society, we live in the landscape of retribution... [And] the retributive community is sustained by... the marketing of fear and fault, gravitation toward more laws and oversight... marginalizing hope and possibility, and devaluing associational life to the point of invisibility."

We won't unpack each of those claims, but if that's what the landscape of retribution looks like, don't you think we live only more deeply within it now than we did in 2008? Peter Block contrasts communities of retribution with communities of restoration. Jesus contrasts communities of mercy with communities of sacrifice. I think these may be different ways into the same truth.

Retribution and sacrifice are about settling scores, are they not, whether the score is with God or with an enemy or with the person across the dinner table from you? But mercy can never be extended in order to get even. If a score gets settled, it's no longer mercy. Mercy is always a gift, and it is always about the restoration of community, whether that's a community of two or twenty or ten million.

So maybe the question Jesus still presses upon us is about what it means for any community of humans to be built upon and cohere around mercy, instead of sacrifice. What would it look like for us to be bound together by the practice of extending grace and gift, in whatever forms they might take in a moment, rather than keeping score and making sure anyone who gets one thing has sacrificed just so much of another? It seems like a community of mercy assumes a state of abundance, while a community of sacrifice is all about scarcity and the fear that there is only so much of anything to go around.

I suspect Mercy Church, like Calvary, has to struggle every day to stay true to the way of mercy and not fall back into our sacrificial ways. Sacrifice can be about getting credit for the hard thing I just did or about making sure this person pays that for what they've done, rather than what will actually serve the restoration of community when it breaks down. Jesus says mercy is what we should always try first in the work of restoration.

Well, we've roamed around a bit in this attempt to unpack what Jesus might have meant when he said God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Let me leave you with one more instance from the week that might crystalize something important in all this.

Peter Block said the retributive community gravitates toward more laws and oversight. Well, for what seem like obvious reasons, no community on earth gravitates more toward more laws and oversight than a church youth group, especially on a mission trip. I promise you'll never be in a group to which the words "Stop doing that" are spoken more often. But the most helpful rule our leaders established was one that seems to have loopholes big enough to drive a fifteen person rental van through. Our young people know it as Jeremy's Rule. And it is simply this: Don't do anything that would hurt Jeremy's soul.

Sure, there were the familiar litanies of what can and can't be packed in your luggage or done to your seat mate. But the kids get Jeremy's Rule. They understand it completely. And I think it works because it trusts them and expects them to do the work of interpretation and application. It works because it's all about tending to relationship in community, not suffering retribution for infractions. It's a rule that restores rather than punishes, maybe because it's a request, not for sacrifice, but for mercy to be extended from one human soul to another.

Each time we manage to do just that, in whatever community we happen to find ourselves in a moment, don't you think we're learning a little more about what Jesus must have meant when he said, "Friends, mercy is what I most desire of you. Mercy is what the people nearby you most need, not sacrifice. Only mercy."?