

Sermon Proper 5A, June 11, 2023 (Track 2)
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https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp5_RCL.html

Hosea 5:15-6:6

Thus says the Lord: "I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favor: 'Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.' What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. Therefore, I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. **For I desire steadfast love (chesed/mercy) and not sacrifice**, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

As 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. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, **'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'** For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

While 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." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Thus says our God through the prophet Hosea:

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.”

Thus says our God through the Chosen One, Jesus:

Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

The word translated “mercy” in today’s Gospel (eleos) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “chesed” (which is translated in today’s first reading from the prophet Hosea as “Steadfast love”)

When, in today’s Gospel, Jesus says ***Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’*** He is quoting directly from the prophet Hosea.

Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

What **does** it mean when God says to us, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”?

Let’s start by considering this word, “mercy”, or in Hebrew, chesed.

CHESED WORD STUDY

The Hebrew word “chesed” occurs 248 times in the Hebrew Bible. In more than half of the cases (149 times to be exact), the King James Version translates “chesed” as *mercy*. Other, less frequent, translations include: *kindness* (40 times), *lovingkindness* (30 times), *goodness* (12 times) "steadfast love", and "compassion".

Contemporary Jewish scholar and teacher Avivah Zornberg has said *chesed* is “not just loving-kindness as it’s usually translated, but is also courage and imagination.” I love that. Mercy is loving-kindness that demands courage and imagination.

It’s significant that in the Hebrew Scriptures Chesed—whether we translate it as mercy, kindness, compassion, goodness, or loving-kindness that demands courage and imagination—Chesed always occurs in the context of a covenant obligation’.

That means the word “chesed” is only used in cases where there is some recognized tie between the parties concerned. *Chesed* always implies a connection, a community, a responsibility which both parties in a relationship have towards one another.

Jesus says, Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

Just as the lawyer, seeking to justify himself, once asked Jesus, “who is my neighbor?”, so we might be inclined to justify ourselves by asking Jesus: “To whom must I show mercy?” “With whom do I share a “recognized tie?” “Just how far does my “covenantal obligation” extend? Who is included, and (more to the point) who isn’t included?

When we hear the word “Covenant” in church we might think of Marriage, or in the Episcopal Church we might think of the Baptismal Covenant. But when it comes to the Hebrew Scriptures, we probably most often think of the covenant between God and Israel, represented by the Law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The covenant that was carried in the “Ark of the Covenant” until it finally came to rest in the Jerusalem temple. But each of these covenants—the covenant of marriage, the covenant of baptism, the covenant marked by obedience to the Law—is too narrow a covenant to help us understand the mercy, the *chesed*, that God desires and perhaps even demands from us.

But the idea of God’s Covenantal Community didn’t begin with Moses. The Hebrew scriptures call us to remember even older, wider covenants God made with our ancestors.

There is the Covenant that God makes with Abraham and all his descendants in Genesis Chapter 17:

God says: ‘As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.... I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring* after you. (Genesis 17)

Going further back, still, Genesis Chapter 9 bears witness to an even older, wider Covenant God makes with the whole earth after the Great Flood:

“God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ...I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’ (Genesis 9:12-13)

Scripture attests to the fact that we belong to a God who has entered into covenantal relationship, not just with one small group of people—but with the whole creation. And so, our covenantal obligation does not just extend to a handful of people who are “like us” when it comes to culture, or religion or laws or lifestyle. Because we are part of God’s Covenant Community, our covenantal obligation, like God’s, extends to *all people*, and *every living creature*, and the *earth itself*.

And so, when we ask Jesus, “to whom must we show mercy, lovingkindness, goodness, compassion, steadfast love animated by courage and imagination”, “to whom do we owe *chesed*?” Jesus answers unequivocally: “everyone”: all people, and every living creature, and the earth itself.

But Jesus doesn't just tell us what we must do. He shows us. In today's Gospel, Jesus shows us by calling Matthew, a despicable, despised tax collector to be his disciple. He shows us by sharing table fellowship with outcasts and sinners. He shows us by restoring a desperate and hemorrhaging woman to health. He shows us by accepting the invitation to the home of his religious adversary, a leader of the synagogue, and by bringing a dead girl back to life.

Jesus says, Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

What does that mean? Just Listen! Look! See!

For starter (Jesus shows us) it means:

- We don't sacrifice children
- We don't sacrifice women.
- We don't sacrifice the sick
- We don't sacrifice people society deems “unclean”
- We don't sacrifice people religion deems “sinners”
- We don't sacrifice people because of their past
- And (hmm hmm, Mr. Tax Collector Matthew) we don't sacrifice our integrity and we don't sacrifice the poor

It can be tempting to try to “buy” our safety or security and salvation by sacrificing others. We do it in personal relationships. We do it in politics. We do it in the Church. We sacrifice the vulnerable, the sick, the poor. We sacrifice those deemed “sinners” or deemed ‘unclean’. We sacrifice children and elders. We sacrifice queer folk and people with disabilities and people of color. We sacrifice others. We sacrifice ourselves. We sacrifice the earth. But Jesus says to us:

Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

“You will only experience the abundant life that God desires for you, the abundant life that I offer you when you learn to choose mercy, and abandon your cruel and futile sacrifices for good.”

CONCLUSION

In Hebrew, a person who embodies mercy, or *chesed*, is known as a *chasid* (*hasid*, חסיד), one who is faithful to the covenant and who goes "above and beyond that which is normally required."

We've all heard of Hasidic Jews. But what would it mean for us to be Hasidic Christians? Hasidic Episcopalians? Hasidic Humans? What would it mean for us to be Hasidim? To go "above and beyond that which is normally required" in our relationships? What would it mean for us to "go above and beyond" in our faithfulness to the Covenant God made after the Flood with all people, all flesh, and the earth itself? What would it mean for us to "go above and beyond" in our faithfulness to the Covenant Jesus Renewed in giving his life for the life of the World? What would it be like to experience salvation—to inhabit the Kingdom of God— by practicing mercy—*kindness*, *goodness*, "steadfast love," "compassion," and *lovingkindness* with courage and imagination— rather than exacting from others their lives as our sacrifice?

Each week when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we remember how, on the night before he was handed over as a sacrifice:

“Jesus took a cup and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’

This cup is the new covenant...

Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

Today, and each time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, may we renew our participation in the Covenant—the First Covenant between God and the Earth which was Renewed in the Covenant of Jesus' Life and Death and REsurrection.

As we share the bread, which is Christ's body, and share the cup, which is Christ's Blood, may we reaffirm the bonds of loving obligation that bind us to one another, and to all people, and to the earth itself.

As we share the stories of Jesus and the stories of our own lives, may we be inspired and strengthened to become Hasidim—people who go above and beyond what is normally required; people who resist the temptation to save ourselves by sacrificing others, people who embrace and embody mercy, compassion, and loving kindness with courage and imagination in each moment and each interaction, with each person and each creature, wherever we are and wherever we go.

Just as Jesus called Matthew to be his disciple

So, Jesus is calling each one of us

“Come follow me, and learn what this means,

‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

Amen.

NOTES:

matqaion matthaion G3156 n_ Acc Sg m MATTHEW

maqete mathete G3129 vm 2Aor Act 2 Pl BE-LEARNING be-ye-learning ! MATHEO

eleon eleon G1656 n_ Acc Sg m MERCY

(Luke 1: magnificat/ Benedictus; Mercy & Peace throughout Epistles)

qusian thusian G2378 n_ Acc Sg f SACRIFICE