

Messiah Moravian Church
June 11, 2023
Second Sunday After Pentecost, Year A
Dane Perry
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

MERCY NOT SACRIFICE

Morgan Guyton writes about his time as an intern at a church in downtown Durham, NC. He had been studying the Gospel of Matthew, especially pondering verse 9:13. At the time, his church was collaborating with another church to hold a summer camp for disadvantaged children.

One morning, a homeless man slept in the parking lot. Ladies from the church asked the young minister to wake the man up and send him away. So Morgan tapped him on the shoulder. The homeless man went ballistic, cursing and threatening him in a demonic rage.

Morgan turned to leave but then the Lord seemed to speak to him in a way that made him turn back. The homeless man said, "Where's your _____ mercy, man?" You can fill in the beep with the nastiest curse word you know. In spite of the foul language, Morgan felt it was a holy moment. He sat on the ground in front of the homeless man, determined to let him strike out or do whatever he was going to do.

Julius, an African-American volunteer from the church, came over and tried talking gently to the homeless man who repeatedly screamed horrible racial insults at him. It was the first time Morgan had seen a black person called those words to his face. But Julius never flinched or wavered in his gentleness; he kept his cool the entire time. At that point Morgan realized that Julius's way of mercy was what God wanted him to learn.

"Go and find out what this means: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice.'" Or as Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message* puts it, "I'm after mercy, not religion." Jesus is quoting Hosea 6:6. No other Old Testament verse is quoted twice in the same gospel during conversations with the same people. So it must be important to Matthew and Jesus. Jesus is making a critical distinction between mercy (His way) and sacrifice (the Pharisees' way).

He rebukes the Pharisees after they criticize him for associating with sinners in 9:13 and later for letting his disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath in 12:7. He's had enough of their self-righteousness, enough of their rules, their walls, their rigidity of right-versus-wrong, us-versus-them.

The way of Jesus represents a monumental shift of religious expectations. For Jesus, religion is no longer a contractual arrangement between the worshipper and God. No longer something like, "Here's what God requires: you do the rituals correctly, you follow the rules, then you're good with God." It's the same when people do expected acts of charity because they think God will be pleased. For those folks such a quid pro quo mentality makes righteousness easy and publically identifiable.

When a relationship with God depends on following prescribed rules and human-made standards, then it is very easy to draw the lines of exclusivity

What does life look like when it is shaped by mercy rather than by sacrifice? In his book, *The Principle of Mercy*, Jon Sobrino explores the Good Samaritan parable. He observes that the Samaritan stopped, not "to comply with a commandment, but only because he was moved by mercy." The difference between the Samaritan and the others was not that he had better ethics or stronger spiritual disciplines. Essentially, his heart could feel mercy.

Mercy is more than just being kind or even generous. Mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom we have the power to punish or harm. It can include withholding punishment that is deserved. Parents and teachers do that sometimes. Judges and juries do also. One of the most compelling acts of mercy is for a family member of a murder victim to ask the jury not to impose the death sentence on the defendant.

Mercy can also include giving aid when one has the power to withhold it. The Good Samaritan could have walked by but instead he chose to extend merciful assistance. There is always a power component to mercy. For the priest and Levite, their daily ritual sacrifices did not move their hearts towards compassion. Perhaps for them, ritual sacrifices substituted for mercy.

To be filled with mercy is essentially an orientation towards others that rejects the strict polarities of relational divisions and the walls of self-righteousness built by a quid pro quo relationship with God.

Enough, Jesus says, to the Pharisees. Enough with the social rigidity. Enough with the smug appraisal of "this" as godly and "that" as unacceptable. And if we think such self-righteousness would only be found among first century Pharisees, we just need to observe the cultural and social conflicts of today fed by religious rigidity.

Enough, God says, I desire mercy, a way of being with me and others by making space for each other just as they are. And we share that space with gratitude because God is there

too, who is filled with even more mercy than we could ever manage. Wondrously, God makes room for each one of us.

The Old Testament prophets constantly reprimanded their people for pitting love of God against love of neighbor:

From Isaiah: " 'The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?' " says the Lord. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals... Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.' " [Isaiah 1:11, 17]

From Micah: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?... He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." [Micah 6:7-8]

From Amos: "Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." [Amos 5:21-22,24]

A life informed by mercy understands the inseparable union described in 1 John 4:12: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." Loving God and loving neighbor can never be separated. We practice praying, fasting, singing hymns, donating blood, making meals for the homeless or bringing food for Sunny Side, not to prove anything to God by our actions but to give God's love dominion over our hearts through our mercy.

Mercy is always about making room. Mercy is not just giving someone the benefit of the doubt or trying to see the best in others. Genuine mercy is offering an acceptance that says, "We're quite different, and I don't know if I understand, and it'd be easier and tidier to disapprove or set you apart or wish you were more like me -- but you are my brother, my sister, my neighbor, my friend, just as you are."

We have a choice. We can imitate the merciful Good Samaritan who stopped to help a stranger because, like him, we have the power and room in our lives to extend mercy. The real question for us should not be, *can* we offer mercy, but *how* do we offer mercy to the most vulnerable in our society, as Jesus expects of us.