

“I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice”; sermon delivered by The Rev. Chana Tetzlaff at The Episcopal Church of St. Chrysostom, Chicago on June 7, 2026; Proper 5A, Text: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

View/listen at: <https://www.youtube.com/live/KUnjAVE8yOw?si=8YqIFOp038yNssob&t=1372>

Do you ever wonder where our scripture readings for Sunday come from? Episcopalians share a lectionary, with many other mainline denominations, that assigns readings for every Sunday and holy day. So if you attend regularly over the 3-year cycle, you'll read a *lot* of the Bible. I appreciate that our lectionary gives us a broad variety of literature (poetry, fables, case law, narrative stories) that weaves us through all the beauty, ugly moments, questions, and complexity of following God's Way. Inspiring stories show us how we can take part in God's larger story. Sometimes a passage may be so beautiful we commit it to memory for comfort. Sometimes a text may leave a bitter taste as we chew on its meaning, may make us feel judged or inadequate to the task. And sometimes we hear odd texts or references that make us wonder “what was THAT about?” Often, these bits and pieces feel disjointed, until we understand how they connect, how each part relates to the bigger picture, and how it relates to our own lives.

That's not just a challenge today. Even in ancient times the sages were tasked with trying to figure out “what IS God saying here - to us, or to me, or to you specifically?” Even in today's story from Matthew, Jesus' audience was wondering “what was THAT about?” And it doesn't help that this story is a snippet of a snippet. Major pieces of the scene are left out, and it's in the larger setting that we find the full meaning. Jesus himself draws on scripture in this exchange to make a point. Jesus cites and re-interprets the prophet Hosea in a new situation that challenges what it means to follow God's way: “*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.’ⁱ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*”

The situation begins when Jesus is in his own town, with his own people. Jesus forgives the sins of a paralyzed man brought to him by others for healing. Not because this particular person deserves healing more than others, but Jesus is “doing a teaching”, symbolically showing how God responds to the universal human need for God's forgiveness. The teachers of the law aka the religious leaders accuse Jesus of blasphemy because he forgives sins, acts in God's place. So Jesus does a miracle. He heals the man's paralysis, the man stands up and walks.

And then the pattern repeats, in the portion we read today. Jesus calls Matthew, the tax collector, to follow and learn from him. As Jesus eats dinner with Matthew, other “sinners” approach and sit. A second group of religious leaders approach not Jesus directly, but Jesus's disciples, passively-aggressively objecting to this teacher eating with “unacceptable people.” Jesus teaches again, this time in a pointed parable in the portion missing from our reading today; a parable that

commentator Eugene Boring notes, declares that “the mercy of God, extended to humanity in Christ, takes precedence over all else, so that everything in the Law must be understood in this light.”ⁱⁱ And then Jesus underscores this point with two more healings. God responds to those seeking God’s mercy: when a religious leader defects from religious tradition to request a miracle from Jesus, and when a woman religiously “unclean,” suffering hemorrhages from a chronic illness for 12 years, dares to approach Jesus in hope for God’s mercy. These two individuals, as well as the tax collectors and sinners, who come from all different walks of life, share something in common that makes it possible for them to receive the miracles and teachings that other, more “proper” people resist.

In Jesus’s time, the tax collectors were seen as traitors, grifters, sellouts, collaborators with the Roman government who collected increasingly oppressive taxes to send outside the land. Sinners were people who broke the Law by violating family or community welfareⁱⁱⁱ. Sinners were also religiously unclean if they did not atone through worship sacrifices and rituals; often the view of ill people such as the hemorrhaging woman or paralyzed man or religious leader whose child dies, was that they must have done something to “deserve” their affliction, whether the sin was known to the wider community or not.

All these individuals face urgent situations: they are isolated, even shunned, from supportive community. They are desperate, without control to change their lives, with nothing to lose and everything to gain from the gamble, taking a risk and reaching for this lifeline of hope Jesus offers. Their social *humiliation*, the very crisis that brings them in front of Jesus, leads them to *humility: open to receive the gift while aware they have done nothing to deserve God’s mercy.* (repeat)

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus reminds the people that God’s mercy – God’s loving-kindness, God’s compassion – is the point of the law and sacrifices. The worship rituals are meant to ingrain just and merciful behavior toward God and each other. So Jesus’s *practice* of inviting and eating with and restoring tax collectors and sinners to community is consistent with his act of death on the cross – God’s judgment, from beginning of scripture to the end, is mercy and restoration. And this is the very precept that makes the religious establishment DEEPLY uncomfortable, because it challenges all our social and religious norms: God may not give us what we deserve. God forgives. Even *those* people we hope will “get what they deserve” may not. God’s mercy is outside of our control.

People full of certitude, who have everything in their lives under control, the people who know how everything ought to be done (often our own way), the people who get to tell everyone else who’s in and who’s out... what need do they have to follow Jesus? But the people Jesus eats

with, the people willing to learn, to question and admit they may not know all, the people willing to ask and hope and risk and invite others in – they are the ones who receive the kingdom, the *kin-dom*, the *common union* with God^{iv}.

All fall short of the glory of God. We're all in the same boat. We rise and fall together. But the ones who will see God most clearly, the ones who will bear the story and bring the hope are the ones who humbly request, "may God build a new Way in me."

ⁱ Hosea 6:6

ⁱⁱ Boring, Eugene. *The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections*. Matthew 9:1-17, Christ's Call Generates Opposition. New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, pp232-236

ⁱⁱⁱ Levine, Amy Jill. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Commentary note v9:10 Oxford University Press, c. 2011

^{iv} Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/communion>. Etymology note: "First recorded in 1350–1400; Middle English, from Anglo-French, from Latin *commūniōn-*, stem of *commūniō* "mutual participation, sharing,"

from *commūn(is)* [common](#) + *-iō -ion*In Latin, *communiō*. See additional note: "Used by Augustine, in belief that the word was derived from *com-* "with, together" + *unus* "oneness, union" at <https://www.etymonline.com/word/communion>.