

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 5A  
Hosea 5:15-6:6  
Romans 4:13-25  
Matthew 9:9-13,18-26

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Mercy is the theme that links today's scriptures. Jesus said: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Echoing the prophet Hosea: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice." Meaning: the quality of our relationships is more important than any ritual.

Mercy is God's compassion for all people. Mercy is all those times God weeps at the pain we cause each other. Mercy is also all those times God chooses to forgive us, out of compassion for our weakness and confusion. God's mercy is central to our faith. God is moved by human needs, and God responds with mercy.

It would be wonderful if all God's followers would emphasize mercy and compassion in their faith -- but it seems like mercy has been one of the hardest things for human beings to learn.

In Jesus' day it was the Pharisees who made an art out of limiting God's mercy. They were obsessed with following religious laws. They took pains to keep themselves ritually pure, morally, spiritually, and physically – maintaining sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole. (Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*)

Our culture today has its own rules for what makes a person "clean" or "unclean." These rules have to do with the color of a person's skin, the language they speak, their sexual orientation or gender identity, where they live, how much money they have. These rules aren't written down anywhere, but they might as well be. We're not as far ahead of the Pharisees as we might think.

Jesus came to teach all of us an entirely new way, centered in God's mercy. What strikes us most about Jesus is how he treated the people around him. Instead of shunning, Jesus shared meals with sinners and touched untouchables. He accepted the outcast, he made broken people whole, he welcomed little children when others wanted to send them away. For Jesus, honoring God wasn't about staying pure, it was about living compassionately. Today's gospel tells story after story of Christ showing mercy.

There was a tax collector named Matthew who sat in his booth counting the day's receipts. He made his salary by overcharging taxpayers and pocketing the surplus. So by definition, Matthew was a crook. Righteous folks snubbed him and pretty much

everybody hated him. But one person seemed to see beneath Matthew's crusty exterior to the lonely soul inside. One man saw his potential. I doubt we can fully understand how radical – how merciful! -- it was for Jesus to call Matthew to be his disciple

There was a woman filled with shame and despair. Her body was betraying her, bleeding for twelve long years, and this was more than a personal health struggle. Religious purity laws condemned the natural cycles of women's bodies. They labeled her unclean and barred her from many normal activities. But this woman reached out boldly to touch Jesus's clothes -- and Jesus turned, fixed his gaze on her, graced her with the full power of his compassionate, healing attention. Jesus greeted her not as a second-class person but a daughter of God. I doubt we can fully understand how radical—how merciful! -- it was for Jesus to touch and heal this woman.

And even more so, the way Jesus went to the home of the synagogue leader – who was an important man, surely a man seen as being holy and pure – but at his house Jesus did the unthinkable. He touched the dead body of the man's little daughter, to raise her to life. This is something the priests of Israel would never have done—touching a corpse. It was the highest defilement. But Jesus touched the little girl, and she opened her eyes. For the sake of mercy, those religious rules had to be broken.

Time and again Jesus went out of his way to intentionally, deliberately, publicly defy those oppressive social and religious norms – because he heard God saying: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Compassion, not empty ritual. Love, not judgment.”

Jesus reaches out to all of us with God's mercy and lovingkindness. We have known what it is like to be ashamed of ourselves, to feel that we are somehow unclean and unworthy. We know what it is like to be sick of ourselves sometimes and sick of our ways... to wish for a new start and a new chance at life. There are many times we have been lonely for God's love-- lonely for the unconditional acceptance only God can give. Many times we have needed some kind of proof that we are worthy of God's consideration, proof that God accepts us and forgives us and loves us as we are. Proof that God's mercy is for us, too-- and not just for somebody else who needs it more.

Jesus reaches out to all of us with God's mercy. And in Christ's forgiving love we are found again. We are brought home. Given a fresh start. In fact we live in a constant state of thanks and praise for our merciful and loving God who accepts us and forgives us and gives us the gift of new life, again and again.

Mercy is at the very heart of Christ's ministry. For people who follow Christ, mercy is meant to be at the heart of who we are too. How do we practice Christ's mercy,

personally and as a society? How do God's compassion and lovingkindness shape our dealings with other people?

I think we know what examples not to follow. Today many people who call themselves Christian seem to be working awfully hard to establish their own modern-day purity code—not just for churchgoers but enacted into law for the general public. Their purity code excludes people who've needed abortions. It condemns people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer in any expression. Their purity code is about banning books and denying medical treatment. It wants to prohibit textbooks that teach about evolution or dare to reckon with the institutional racism that continues to scar our siblings and warp our nation.

It is difficult to see where mercy or compassion plays into this worldview, but it's easy to see how readily people entrenched in an old order can oppose justice and deny other people their rights – all the while calling it holiness, calling it God's will.

I wonder how compassionate love can find bold expression in our civic life. How mercy can boldly challenge judgmentalism. How people who love Jesus can call out these movements that claim to be Christian but actually betray God's mercy in so many ways.

True mercy is about being moved by the needs of others, and responding. Mercy is about showing compassion and lovingkindness in our everyday lives. Mercy is-- well, you know it when you see it.

One person who's taught me about mercy is a guy named Ryan Dowd, who ran a homeless shelter in Chicago and puts out an email newsletter for people who do the same. Ryan writes about situations others don't discuss – like what's the best way to de-escalate someone who's riled up – and he does it with a spirit of humor and kindness and good common sense. One thing Ryan Dowd emphasizes over and over is treating every person with respect. Greeting each person with positive regard, no matter who they are. Treating people as valuable human beings, no matter their station in life.

One morning a man named Michael came running up to Ryan in the parking area. Michael was a big guy who'd been homeless for decades, and this morning his clothes were covered with mud, he had leaves in his hair, and he was angry and riled up and yelling loud. It would have been easy for Ryan to react with alarm. But instead, here's what Ryan did. He turned to face this big guy Michael, he made eye contact, he smiled, he put his hand out to shake his hand, and he said, "Good morning, Michael!" in his most welcoming voice. Michael stopped five feet short of him, with a look of slight confusion. "Uh, good morning," Michael said in a quieter voice. He shook Ryan's hand. And they started a conversation that actually went somewhere. (10/4/22)

I'm not suggesting we can all do something like this – but it's genius, isn't it? Greeting Michael with respect went such a long way. It told him he mattered. It defused his anger, it helped him calm himself, it made it possible for these men to connect. Ryan's behavior told Michael he was somebody. Not a problem but a person. It expressed compassion. It expressed mercy.

Ryan Dowd says his mentor was a nun, Sister Rose Marie, and her philosophy was based on one truth: *All people are basically good. Each person is of intrinsic value and worth, just because they are human.*

And Ryan goes on to ask: *Do you believe that? Do you believe that EVERY person is of incalculable value? Do you really, I mean REALLY, believe that?*

*Do you believe that each homeless person, and every drug addict and all convicted criminals and Donald Trump and Joe Biden and Brad Pitt and Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Paris Hilton are all of inherent value and worth?*

And Ryan issues a challenge: *For the next few hours, every time you see someone think to yourself, "That person is of inherent value." Make sure you do it when you see someone you don't like. That is where this exercise can change your heart.*

(sign up for a newsletter from Ryan Dowd <https://www.homelesstraining.com/about/> or [ryan@homelesslibrary.com](mailto:ryan@homelesslibrary.com), these stories are from 10/4/22 and 11/1/22)

I don't know what Ryan Dowd's religious beliefs may be, if any, but it's clear to me that he understands mercy. And I hope you and I can come to understand mercy, too, so that wherever we are and whoever we are with, our first lens can be compassion and respect for other human beings, in the spirit of Christ's love.

Jesus said, *Go and learn what this means: Mercy comes first.*

Every day is our opportunity to learn mercy and walk in Jesus's way. Thanks be to God. Amen.