

Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26
Sermon by Rev. Chip Graves
Proper 5

In our gospel lesson Jesus replies, **“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”**. This concept of mercy is key. I believe that once again Jesus shows us the way by turning the local culture upside down. But *eating with tax collectors, what is Jesus doing?* Jesus’ proclamation of forgiveness, of compassion for those unlike ourselves is not soft-spoken but a resounding command, a paradigm shift away from local Jewish custom. And Jesus here today, here at St. Johns continues this outcry, this demand for us to love one another, someone unlike ourselves.

Initially we are drawn to an all too common conclusion with regard to today’s passage, declaring that tax collectors in this passage were beyond redemption or forgiveness of any kind”. In fact, many would go so far as to describe tax collectors as betrayers and corruptors, classifying them today as a child molester or some other notorious figure.

But I say, No. After more research we realize this is not the case. Tax collectors in Imperial Rome were not the abominable souls proclaimed by many. The point of this narrative was not to damn those with whom Jesus ate but to show that we, Like Jesus can love even those unlike ourselves. Tax collectors of the day were not the swindling predators that many make them out to be. In fact, they were outcasts from society unable to hold down a regular job. Tax collectors were lowly paid entrepreneurs working for chief Roman tax contractors and never becoming profitable.

The vast majority of Roman citizens did not despise tax collectors fore they had nothing to pay them. Those who did despise tax collectors were wealthy tradesmen who had the means to pay taxes and religious leaders, Rabbis who thought it unpatriotic to tax Jews in their own land. It was these two groups, wealthy tradesmen and religious leaders who deemed tax collectors unclean and outside the mainstream.

As we ponder this new look upon tax collectors within our gospel passage, we must ask, *Who would we deem ‘tax collectors’ in today’s world, someone outside our mainstream?* Perhaps someone outside our immediate community or our neighborhood. Perhaps someone outside our ethnic background. Perhaps someone outside our school system or achieved educational level. Or perhaps someone outside our tax bracket. And the list goes on.....

We need to look no further than our front door here at St. Johns to witness someone beseeching our mercy; someone outside our mainstream. Just two weeks ago, a middle aged man, approached me off the street with a request for help as he had no shelter for himself and his two children. As we spoke, I saw him (let’s call him Hank) as a beaten man, one whom life had whipped back and forth between various charities and non profits for support. He simply did not know where to turn next. Even his words were unclear; plain spoken, but slurred – not from drugs – but from lethargy driven by his constant fighting the world just to stay afloat; just to keep his children alive.

I quickly realized that this situation was appropriate for our Crossroads ministry; one in which a small committee here at St. Johns interviews people in such dire circumstances. We set up a meeting. And as we sat in the small conference room upstairs, Hank's story unfolded; his hands quivering, tears swelling in his eyes while his small children aged 3 and 7 played quietly on the floor before us. He began slowly, sharing that the mother of his children and he had divorced several months before.

He continued that most recently they had lost their family home just outside Roanoke to foreclosure. Their financial debacle was only a symptom of their failed marriage and personal challenges. Perhaps most paramount was the fact that his wife was a drug user. It had taken its toll -- on their finances, on their marriage and most certainly on the children. As his wife realized they were going to divorce she abducted the children and took them on a three month run across the United States. During this period they lived in 11 different rescue missions in three different states. I can't imagine the damage done to the children. They had been abused; saw things they should not have seen. Fortunately, the court system finally forced the return of the children to Hank.

And here they were before us, penniless and without a home and yet desperately seeking a better path. Unfortunately this is an all too common story that we come across in our outreach ministries, Crossroads and Morning Outreach. These cases are desperate, seemingly no way out. Sheer emptiness and infinite despair; always a lack of money; no place to live; no job; ill health or disability; children out of school or set back a year or two. Depression sets in. There is no way out.

Our gospel lesson today is not about judging others. But instead, we are called as Christians to hold compassion for others, and perhaps most importantly for those unlike ourselves. Good people of St. Johns, we realize that God's love crosses all boundaries. To simply name the challenges is only half the battle. I ask you here today to take a stand. I ask that you get involved and name your new outreach. We have several from which to choose; Community Living Club, Morning Outreach, Interfaith Hospitality, and so many more. I ask that you pick one. Give your new outreach an hour or two whenever you can. Your help may save someone's life. In the end, we have been called by Jesus to display mercy, to hold compassion for others -- others unlike ourselves. The question now becomes *not why we become involved but when.*
Amen.