

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

In our gospel reading today from Matthew, Jesus gets into trouble with the Pharisees. Yet again! The reading begins with Jesus calling Matthew the tax collector to be his disciple. He may be serving as a customs agent, collecting duties on goods in transit, as Matthew lives on a busy highway. (Note this Matthew is probably not the one who wrote the gospel of Matthew). After calling him, Matthew joyfully invites people to his house for a meal. So Jesus, his disciples, and ‘sinners’ – that is, people who do not obey Jewish food laws – come to his house in Capernaum for a celebratory meal. For Jesus to call Matthew, and also to eat with him, were really shocking moves by Jesus. When Jesus called Simon and Andrew, that may have been surprising, because they were not religious scholars or even especially learned. But tax collectors were another class of person completely. Fishing was an honourable occupation, but being a tax collector was most definitely not. Tax collectors, working for the Romans, extorted excess taxes for their own profit. They were held in great contempt and barred from the synagogue.

It is no wonder that when the Pharisees see Jesus eating with such a person as Matthew, they ask the disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 11b). Jesus overhears the comment and responds, saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick”. It’s clear what Jesus is saying here, and this is good news for all of us. Jesus, God incarnated, came for everyone, not simply those who are ‘religious’ and obey all the rules. He came for all of us. None of us can claim to be perfect, and always do the right things. We are human and we often fail.

But the Pharisees thought that people should not mix with those who are sinful, because their sin may rub off on them. They did have a point. The Talmud taught, “Associate not with the wicked man, even if thou canst learn from him.” To some extent, this is true. We can be corrupted by bad company. For instance, if a person is trying to abstain from taking drugs and alcohol, it is not going to help them by associating with those who use these substances, even if they are friends or family.

What Jesus is showing the Pharisees though, and everyone at that meal, is that God loves everyone, despite their having a label of ‘sinner’ or ‘failed human being’ or ‘they can’t get their act together.’ Jesus reaches out to the lost at great risk to himself in the hope of saving people who do not seem worth saving. It’s actions like this that will cost him his life. We can also reach out to others who the world may view as ‘hopeless’ or ‘sinful.’ It helps if we are grounded in Christ, and supported by our faith by being in community with other Christians. With such a firm foundation, and recognizing that we are all sinners in many ways, we can bring the love of Christ to others and show his mercy.

The final words that Jesus says to the Pharisees in this interaction are, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’ (v13a). For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” These are the most important words that Jesus says to the Pharisees. He’s saying that their understanding of scripture is faulty. That’s a huge insult to the Pharisees who consider themselves to be the absolute authorities on the interpretation of scripture. Now this upstart, Jesus, tells them to go and learn what the quotation, which is from Hosea 6:6, means.

“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” is a common Jewish phrase meaning, “I desire steadfast love mercy more than sacrifice.” The word sacrifice here stands for obedience to Torah law—the ultimate sign of one’s devotion to God. However, Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea to point out that God prefers mercy to a slavish devotion to the

requirement for sacrifices. But does quote actually mean something different, not ‘mercy’ but ‘steadfast love?’ The problem here is that the Hebrew word that Hosea uses is difficult to translate. The Hebrew word is ‘hesed’ – an important word in the Old Testament that’s used frequently. The word is often translated as ‘mercy’ but also means steadfast love, goodness, kindness or compassion.

So why is the translation important here and what does it mean for us?

The first thing to note is that it means that God desires something more than just mercy. God desires kindness, and goodness, and loyalty, and God desires our steadfast love. God desires ‘hesed’ not just sacrifice. It means God desires all these other things from us as well.

God and his asking us for our ‘hesed’, our steadfast love and mercy, but God is only asking us for what God has already given us. Throughout the Old Testament, God shows us again and again that his steadfast love for his people endures forever. God shows us that his goodness and mercy – his hesed – follow us all the days of our life.

And the ultimate gift to us was that God sent his only begotten son, Jesus, to show us this mercy and love in the flesh. And Jesus always shows us his steadfast love and his mercy; for all of God’s children, and especially for those who most need it.

Even in today’s gospel reading, we see Jesus doing this, when he shows that mercy to the leader of the synagogue by bringing his daughter back to life, and when he shows that very same mercy to the woman who had been suffering hemorrhages for twelve long years. Jesus showed mercy and loving kindness to whoever needed it – Jewish leaders and lepers, Pharisees and fishermen, the wealthy and the poor, the tax collectors and the so-called sinners. Jesus showed that same mercy to those who believed, and those who didn’t believe. His mercy is steadfast and it is unconditional, and it is for all of God’s children. Jesus was born to show us that love. To offer us that mercy. And to call not the righteous but the sinners. And to heal the sick. And to raise the dead. And finally, to go to the cross, bearing all our sins. That is what ‘hesed’ is all about. A steadfast, merciful, kind, good, loyal, everlasting, love. And that is the love that Jesus has for us all. AMEN