

There are some passages that help us mark the phases of our lives. One of these is graduation. Because it has been a week of graduations all around us, it has given me pause to consider that graduation speakers all over the country are giving graduates their words of wisdom as they embark on a new chapter in their life. As I looked at the gospel, verse 13 stood out as a charge for students: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." I'm guessing that was not at the heart of any graduation address this week, but it is good for us to consider here together this morning as a community of faith.

Jesus wasn't talking to young students of the faith - he was talking to people all around him who were attempting to live according to the Law. Among them asking questions of Jesus, the newest teacher in town, are the Pharisees - those holding themselves to the strictest

purity regulations. Accordingly, the obvious sinner and the sick and lame and the poor were impure and were cut off from participation and protection of the community. Yet, it is these that Jesus extends mercy to. To those pronounced unclean and unlovable, Jesus responds in a loving, healing manner. That is what Jesus asks of us. "Go and learn what this means".

This is hard for us. Too often we find ourselves like the Pharisees. We judge who should receive mercy and who should not. This often involves comparing ourselves to others - keeping score, if you will. Or like the Pharisees, *we* have all of the answers, know the way things should be...and this is not only an adolescent or teen phase, there are plenty of adults that think this way, too..."if only they would follow my advice, they wouldn't have such problems..."

And, in terms of sacrifice - from the time of Hosea to the time of Jesus, sacrifice was a ritual that someone did to get themselves right with God. Sacrifice, for some had become empty, meaningless, simply what one performed with no repentance, no change in the way one lived their life. As such it had become a manipulation to get back in God's good graces rather than trusting God's mercy. When we think and act like this, we are like hamsters on a wheel trying to make ourselves right before God.

That's because the balance of judgment and mercy is out of whack. When tension is not kept and the heavy hand of judgment outweighs mercy in human relationships, then there is sacrifice. Abiding by the laws of purity forced exclusion and shunning of tax collectors, the sick and lame, the prostitutes from the community for they were impure and therefore not fit for the divine presence. When Jesus blessed their meal together,

calling for God's presence in the midst of this meal with traitors and sinners, the Pharisees object.

So Jesus says "Learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," - and, this is important, are you listening now, did you listen to the Hosea reading? Here Jesus is quoting from Hosea—which is even stronger than Jesus telling them to learn the difference between mercy and sacrifice. He's talking about God's own passion for mercy-God's compassion. And then demonstrating how it is lived out in the call of Matthew, eating with tax collectors and sinners, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

When his dinner party is interrupted and he is led away by a leader of the synagogue to heal his sick daughter. Jesus asks no questions. He doesn't sit and run through a check list to see if this man and his family are worthy of healing, he just goes.

Jesus message is to not lose sight of what lies behind the law. People had and sometimes today have only half the picture of what the judgment of God is like. If depends on us to get ourselves right with God, then friends, we're lost. But, Jesus is saying what lies behind the laws everyone was desperately trying to keep to make themselves right with God is God's character of mercy.

Mercy, according to one definition is "leniency and compassion shown toward offenders by a person or agency charged with administering justice".<sup>1</sup> One preacher described it like this: "judgment is balanced by mercy. Things - we, our actions, our sins, are called into judgment but the sentence is tempered by mercy."<sup>2</sup>

In God's selfless act of love in Jesus' death on a cross, and in Jesus' self-giving act of love on the cross we see God's mercy. It is this that

frees us to respond, not by drawing narrow lines of inclusion for who is in and who is out of God's merciful reach, but to respond in the same loving, healing manner of Jesus. What does this mean for us?

Walk the sidewalks outside of First Trinity morning and night or go over 2 blocks to 2<sup>nd</sup> and D before 7am and after 7pm and it doesn't take long to see people who would clamor to touch the hem of Jesus' cloak. In our own lives, we long to touch Jesus to have our pain healed. In our wider church there are divisions and threats of breaking away. As a community of faith we are called to pray and minister healing to those inside and outside of the church family. Again, what does this mean? How do we do this?

The 1987 novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison shows how a group of women grows in their understanding and then extension of mercy. *Beloved* is a novel, but it also contains a great

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<sup>1</sup> [wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Colbert sermon, *Sacrifice and Judgment*, June 2, 2005

deal of history about slavery and the slave trade. Morrison based the novel loosely on the story of Margaret Garner who killed her children to prevent them from being recaptured and returned to slavery after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850. Sethe, one of the main characters is a woman struggling to survive in the time after slavery. She carries the sin and guilt of having killed one of her daughters to keep her from a life of slavery, giving her a tombstone with only the word *Beloved* on it. When a child, named *Beloved* shows up on the doorstep of the house she shares with her another daughter, Sethe is convinced this is her daughter come back to haunt her, to punish her. She is ostracized by the community she lives in for the bizarre, magical, or some might say, evil events that happen as *Beloved* is in her household. *Beloved* is the journey of Sethe, her daughters and the people she is in relationship with toward reconciliation and restoration with themselves and the

community. It is finally the community of women that confront Sethe and drive out the demon by their prayers *and* their acceptance of Sethe as a courageous member of their community instead of as an ostracized one that brings about her healing.

These women learned to go to the sick, the marginalized, and the one on the outskirts of society. These women lived mercy, not sacrifice as the way of God. But, at some points they had rejected Sethe. I'm sure it took them a lot of life experience to get to a mercy point. A lot of soul searching. A lot of living and making mistakes and taking detours and then getting back on track. It sounds a lot like growing and growing up.

As exciting as the life passage of graduation is, there are some things that we never graduate from...we are always learning, always growing and growing up. I think understanding and sharing God's mercy is one of them.

Hosea 5:15-6:6  
Romans 4:13-25  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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Through Jesus many received a deep, rich mercy that can only come from *God*; a mercy that Jesus asks us to give to those around us. May we know and accept we will always be learning. May we share each other's burdens. May we show the expanse, not narrowness of *God's* mercy.

Amen.