

Sunday, June 7, 2026
Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5A)

Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice”

With our commemoration of Trinity Sunday behind us, we begin a new liturgical season and, along with it, we experience a shift in the focus of our Gospel readings. The Christian Year is divided roughly in half. For the first six months of the liturgical year, beginning with the First Sunday of Advent in late November or early December, we have a string of high holy days focusing on key events in the life of Christ and the accompanying time for us to prepare for those events. In the first half of the liturgical year, we move in rapid succession from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Holy Week to Easter to Pentecost. For good measure, we throw in Trinity Sunday, providing our transition to the Season after Pentecost. Also referred to as Ordinary Time.

Now, just to be clear—and lest you think Ordinary Time sounds boring—Ordinary Time is not “ordinary” as in the sense of commonplace. Rather “ordinary” refers to the mathematical term “ordinal”: to the sequential ordering in a series. In this case, referring to the sequential numbering of the Sundays in this season. Trinity Sunday is technically the First Sunday after Pentecost. Therefore, today is the Second Sunday after Pentecost, with next Sunday being the Third Sunday after Pentecost, and so on, until we reach the 783rd Sunday after Pentecost sometime later in the year. Not really. Sometimes it may seem like it in what we fondly refer to as the “long green season”—referring to the six months of green, which is the color for the Season after Pentecost, for Ordinary Time.

During this Ordinary Time, our focus shifts from key events in the life of Jesus Christ to looking at his public ministry—at his preaching and teaching, at the miracles and healing he performed. We can think of Ordinary Time as a pilgrimage through Jesus’ ministry, with an opportunity to explore what his ministry means for us as his followers. To take a deeper dive into what Jesus is really about, beyond his birth, his Passion, his death and resurrection. All important events. But it is in what he did during the three years of his public ministry that shows in a deeper way who Jesus was and what he was all about. And it is in what he did during his public ministry that gives us an idea of what it truly means to be his followers. This year, Year A of our lectionary, focuses primarily on the Gospel according to Matthew as our guide on this six-month pilgrimage.

Our first look at Jesus’ public ministry in Matthew’s Gospel occurs almost immediately after his famous Sermon on the Mount. Following this sermon, Jesus engages in a series of healings which serve to illustrate the compassion and mercy Jesus talks about—even demands—in that sermon. As is so often the case when dealing with accounts of Jesus’ ministry, his words and actions extend beyond what is actually recorded in the Gospel. There is always another layer of meaning that speaks directly to us as his followers. A layer of meaning that says something about how he relates to us even 2,000 years later, and what that means for us as the Body of Christ in the world.

In today's Gospel account, we actually have several things going on that, while seemingly unrelated, do come together to illustrate an overarching theme in Jesus' life and ministry. We start off with the calling of Matthew as one of Jesus' disciples. Following that call, we have a dinner with "many tax collectors and sinners." This dinner is interrupted by a plea to raise a girl from the dead, which itself is interrupted by a surreptitious act in hopes of bringing healing. A bit disconnected, a bit chaotic, and yet, all in a day's work for Jesus.

We start off with Jesus calling Matthew to follow him, filling out the group of Twelve Disciples. And this one, by all accounts, is unlike any of the others. Matthew is a tax collector. In the Israel of Jesus' day, tax collectors were widely despised and viewed as social outcasts because of being collaborators with the Roman occupiers. Tax collectors were Jews who collected taxes from their own people to help fund the Roman occupation of Israel. In short, they were viewed as being traitors. On top of that, the way the tax collectors obtained their income was by collecting more money than was legally due. In effect, cheating those paying the required taxes as a means of increasing their own personal wealth. As a result, they were considered dishonest, cheating, traitorous collaborators, being shunned by most other Jews.

As if calling a tax collector to be his follower and part of the management team wasn't bad enough, Jesus immediately goes to a dinner attended by "many tax collectors and sinners." Presumably friends of Matthew's. Which is a source of great criticism on the part of the local Pharisees, who ask the other disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Overhearing this, Jesus gives an interesting response. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." He then quotes from the Prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," then adding his own commentary, "For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." In this response, Jesus makes a connection between sinfulness and sickness. Not that sickness is sinful, but rather, that sinfulness is akin to sickness. Just as illness diminishes one's physical health, sinfulness diminishes one's spiritual health. In its simplest and purest sense, sin is that which separates us from God, taking us away from our true and ongoing source of spiritual health. Just as we do not shun those who are sick, neither should we shun someone who is a sinner. Just as illness is not the totality, the essence, of one who is sick or infirmed, neither is sinfulness the totality, the essence, of one who is a sinner. That just as one who is sick is in need of healing, so too, is a sinner in need of healing.

This idea of sin being an illness, an ailment, an infirmity, is central to the African-American spiritual, "There is a Balm in Gilead," which happens to be our communion anthem for today. The refrain being:

There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.

To heal the sin-sick soul. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when he responded to the Pharisees looking in on that dinner with tax collectors and sinners. That he sought to offer a remedy, a balm for the sin-sick soul. What that looks like begins with Jesus' statement of "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Here, "sacrifice" being shorthand for the whole system of laws that define what is clean and what is unclean, what is righteous and what is sinful. "Sacrifice" being

shorthand for the system of religious rules and regulations, the system of ritualistic practices, including ritual sacrifices, that were thought to satisfy God and remove sin from the one so afflicted. In Jesus' mouth, this phrase indicating that mercy and compassion take precedence over sacrifice, over ritualistic practices and religious traditions. Just as with those who are sick, likewise, those who are sinners need mercy and care, not arcane religious practices such as sacrifices, not restrictive religious rules and regulations. Not exclusion, but inclusion. The inclusion that he freely offers.

As if to illustrate the similarities between sinfulness and sickness, between spiritual infirmity and physical infirmity, the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees is interrupted by a leader of the synagogue seeking Jesus' help. This prominent community and religious leader coming to one considered by the Pharisees to be inferior, to be heretical, for daring to eat with sinners and tax collectors—this leader of the synagogue kneels before Jesus, pleading his case. In this situation, acknowledging his recognition of this supposed heretic as being the only one who could possibly help. The only one who could possibly return his dead daughter to life. Asking that he actually do the unthinkable: “come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” Asking that Jesus lay his hands on a dead body? He does know what he is asking, right? That Jesus actually touch a dead body. An action that would violate Jewish law, rendering Jesus ritually unclean. You could not ask for a more perfect illustration of what Jesus had just been saying to the Pharisees. “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” Jesus desires compassion and mercy for this grieving father and his family rather than be concerned with the arcane ritual and religious regulations that would preclude him from acting. Of course, Jesus agrees to do as the religious leader asks. And when he does get to the leader's home, takes the girl by the hand and she is returned to life and to her loving family. “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

As if all this is not enough to illustrate Jesus' point, as he is on his way to the religious leader's home, a woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years quietly comes up behind him and touches the fringe of Jesus' cloak in hopes of being healed. This woman, who because of her ailment would have been ostracized, considered at the complete opposite end of the social and religious spectrum from the leader of the synagogue, also sees Jesus as her only hope. She who is excluded from religious ritual and celebration because of her ailment. She who, in reaching out to Jesus, violates Jewish law and risks making him ritually unclean as well. We are told, “Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’” Jesus sees her. He sees her as she has not been seen in over a decade. Seen not as someone who is sick and therefore unclean. Rather, seen as a beloved child of God, in need of healing. Calling her “daughter,” even as he goes to bring new life to the religious leader's daughter. “And instantly the woman was made well.” “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

By calling a tax collector to be one of his disciples, Jesus heals Matthew of whatever spiritual dis-ease he may have been experiencing as a result of having been a tax collector. In so doing, he reorders social and communal relationships by including the excluded. By eating with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus likewise sanctifies those present, seeing them not as sinners and tax collectors, but as children of God in need of healing whatever spiritual dis-ease they are experiencing. Again, reordering social and communal relationships by including the excluded. By daring to reach out and lay his hand on a dead girl and returning her to life, Jesus crosses the boundary of death, restoring a child to life and restoring a shattered family to wholeness. And by responding to a desperate woman in need of healing, sees her for the daughter of God that

she is, worthy of physical and spiritual healing. Each being a tangible demonstration of his statement, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

In today's Gospel story, all who are in need find healing. Those who are part of the establishment and those on the margins. Those with acute need and those with chronic issues. Those with spiritual need and those with physical ailments. Those who know their need and those who don't. Those who are willing to reach out and those who need to be invited. All demonstrating that Jesus is available, willing, even eager, to provide the healing we desire, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual. And maybe even the healing we don't even know we need.