

Lent II

Monday Matthew 9: 10-13

Mercy not Sacrifice

Teachers sometimes say, "Go and learn what this or that means," in response to a question we might have. They know that our question can only be answered if we learn something else first. Jesus does that in our Bible reading today. The Pharisees asked, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus tells them, "The healthy do not need doctors, but the sick do." But He tells them to go learn what this means, "I desire mercy not sacrifice." Jesus points them back to a statement in the Prophet Hosea (6:6). Later on when the Pharisees get all upset for the disciples feeding their empty stomachs on the Sabbath while walking through a grain field, Jesus says it is because they did not go and learn what He told them to that they are attacking His disciples.

What Jesus wanted the Pharisees to go and learn is what we pray in our Collect this week. God's glory is always to have mercy. More than God wants anything from us, even sacrifices and good works, He wants to have mercy on us. More than He delights in our doing what we are suppose to, He delights in having mercy on us.

You can find numerous passages where God says that His tender mercies are over ALL His works. Each Sunday in the Thanksgiving part of the Common Service the pastor says, "O give thanks unto the Lord for He is good," and the congregation responds, "For His mercy endures forever."

God's Laws of Sabbath and sacrifice did not endure forever. They were but shadows indicating that the Sun of Righteousness, Jesus, was on the way. Even God's wrath does not endure forever. In the midst of His wrath, we can pray as Habakkuk does, "In wrath remember mercy." And the Psalmist knows that even when it feels like He has forgotten, God cannot forget to be merciful. Our God is not a mean, evil tyrant but an ever merciful father. In fact, He chose to be wrathful to His Son just so He could be merciful to you and I, and He is not merciful grudgingly, like Scrooge was to Bob Kratchet in the beginning. No, He delights in it!

Prayer: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Tuesday I Peter 2:25

Going Astray

We ask in our Collect this week that God be merciful to "all who have gone astray from" His ways. One thing you can say for certain about sheep is that they love to wander. Whether they are too busy focusing on the earth from which they get their food and water from or just playing around, they end up straying away from the voice of the Good Shepherd which they hear from those who preach and teach God's Word.

Our Bible reading might make it seem that it is up to us to return to the Shepherd, but you know from the parable of the lost sheep no sheep finds itself. No, the Shepherd must come looking for it. For our part all we can say is what Psalm 119:176 says, "I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek Your servant..." Or we can say with Isaiah 53:6, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;"

The answer to going astray, the hope for sheep that love to wander is only the Good Shepherd. The second part of Isaiah 53:6 tells you that. After admitting that we all, like sheep, have gone astray, we are told the Good News that the Lord laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all. Hebrews 12:20 is equally comforting. It tells us that "through the blood of the eternal covenant" God "brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep."

It is only because we have a Shepherd who suffered and died for our wandering and a Shepherd who rose again from the dead to come and find us that we poor straying sheep have hope. Our hope cannot be based on our finding our way back through prayer and Bible study. Our hope cannot be based on the fact that this time we really mean that we will never go astray again. Our hope would then be grounded on us, only as certain as we are. The only certain fact about sheep is that they love to wander. That is why they have shepherds, and that is why we do too. We have the Good Shepherd who suffered and died for our sins, and who rose to send out under-shepherds, pastors (pastor means "shepherd") to gather His sheep into the fold of the Church.

Prayer: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Thursday John 6:37

Drive Away

When a stray dog starts hanging around, what do people usually do? They drive the dog away. At first, they probably shout at the dog. Then they might clap their hands together loudly. Finally, if that does not work, they might throw a stick or a rock at the dog, not to hurt or even hit the dog but to drive it away. Why? Because the dog does not belong to them. It is not their responsibility. Besides maybe its owner is looking for it.

Yesterday, we mentioned how we sheep love to wander. You know how wandering dogs sometimes look: skinny, with dirty coats. They might have mange or even rabies.

Sheep who stray do not look any better. When we stray away from the Good Shepherd's voice that sounds in our Sunday School or Bible class and in our Church, we come back underfed, dirty with sins, maybe even stained with them and wounded by them. Will we be driven away? Are stray sheep any more loved than stray dogs?

Our Bible reading assures us Jesus never, ever drives away His sheep. Jesus says, "All that the Father gives me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away." In Baptism, the Father gave us to His Son. He clothed us with Him; washed us in His blood, and reborn us as His brother or sister.

Have you ever lost a dog? How sad that is. But if your dog was found, weren't you glad? When it came up the driveway, you did not yell at it, clap your hands, or throw sticks, did you? Of course not, it is your dog. You probably ran to that dog and hugged its dirty neck. Then you ran to get food and water. You probably did not stop petting and loving on your dog for some time. Why? Although the dog had strayed, even ran, away, it was still your dog.

In Baptism we were made God's child and Jesus' brother or sister. When we stray or even run away, we do not cease to be these things. Our Baptism does not "dry up." So when we are found, our Owner can no more drive us away than we could a pet. No, He too covers us with kisses letting us know we are welcome, and then He feeds us just like we had never strayed!

Prayer: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Friday John 10:28

Held or Hold on?

We pray in the Collect for this week that any who have gone astray may be brought back by God "to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth" of His Word. It is good to ask God to cause us to hold on to His Word, and it is good to seek to hold on. However, there is not much comfort in this.

If you fall over a cliff and are holding on to a branch and someone calls to you, "Hold on!", that is good advice. You would really want to do that, and it would certainly be good if you did. But there is no comfort in this picture, is there? There is only tension and doubt and the question, "Will I hold on?"

What if in the same situation a big, strong weight-lifter reaches down and grabs on to you? He says, "That is okay; I've got you." There is much comfort in being held, isn't there? Not falling does not depend on you, but on the big, strong weight-lifter who is used to holding hundreds of more pounds than you weigh.

While it is good and important to pray for and to remember to hold on to God's Word, that is not where comfort or strength for holding on comes from. It comes from being held. Jesus promises us in our text that we are given eternal life, and no one can snatch us out of His hand. Jesus has the will and the power to hold on to us. Death and hell tried to make Him let go of us, but they could not. Sin and unbelief tried to tear us away from Jesus, but He still held on to us.

It sometimes happens that a child, although held by his father or mother, still feels very much afraid. He struggles and whines and cries, "I'm going to fall." Does that cause the father or mother to let him go? Of course not. Does that mean the child is certainly going to fall? Not at all. So it is with our Jesus. Even when we are afraid He is going to let us go, even when we think we are going to fall, Jesus still hangs on to us. Our struggling, our being afraid does not cause us to pop out of His hand.

Prayer: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Saturday Hebrews 13:8

Change and Decay in all around I See

A favorite hymn of many, "Abide with Me," sings about "change and decay in all around I see." This is true. Nothing remains the same. Where there once was an empty field there are now houses. Where there once was farm land there is now a mall. Children grow and adults grow older. Puppies become dogs and kittens cats. The world also changes its mind as to what is right and what is wrong. At one time unborn babies were safe in their mother's womb, now the world says it is okay to kill them there. At one time men and women did not live together till they were actually married, now the world says that is okay too.

Though everything around us changes, Jesus does not. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever says our Bible reading. Moreover, as we pray in our Collect, the Word of God does not change and forever remains true. What the Word of God says about right and wrong does not change no matter how many people think it does. No matter if even the government says what was wrong yesterday is right today, God's Word remains true and certain.

But the real comfort in Jesus and His Word not changing is in the area of the forgiveness of sins. Through your pastor Jesus speaks the Word of forgiveness, the Absolution, to you. You will not wake up one day, and find that it is changed. You will not find some day that now you have to do this or that to be worthy of the forgiveness of sins. You will not find that God has changed His mind and only certain types of sins can be forgiven.

Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. The Jesus who baptized your great, great grandparents yesterday, and the Jesus who baptized your baby sister today, and the Jesus who will baptize your babies tomorrow and your grand babies in future tomorrows does not change. He is the Lord of time and of all times. He does not grow old or outdated. He never becomes obsolete. His Word of Law always applies to right and wrong, and His Word of Gospel always applies to our sins and shortcomings.

Prayer: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.