

“The Table of Mercy” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Pentecost 2 – June 11, 2023

- I. **Matthew 9:13** – [Jesus] said, “For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”
- II. **Showing mercy to others is not always easy, nor is it second nature.**
 - a. In fact, depending on your family upbringing, your own experiences, and the situation you currently live in... you might find showing mercy easy... or very difficult.
 - b. I grew up in a family where you took care of your own problems, and you certainly never told outsiders about issues or troubles you were going through.
 - i. For example, if you had some terrible trial or difficulty going on, and an acquaintance asked, “How’s everything going?” – the answer was always, “Great!” or “Just fine...” and then you moved on to something less threatening like the weather or sports.
 - ii. I felt like if I shared something that was troubling me, or anything like pain or suffering, that I was imposing on the other person – I was dumping my problems off on them to deal with.
 - iii. It makes sense that a person growing up with that mindset would then transfer it to the people around them – wondering why others would talk about their troubles because it almost seems rude or like a sign of weakness.
 - iv. Thankfully, I’ve changed a lot – and I’m much more willing to talk about and listen to the trials we endure.
 - c. Others struggle to show mercy because they look at the other person as undeserving – or consider the person and their lifestyle as a reason to reject them rather than show mercy.
 - d. Jesus was spending time with some of these people when the Pharisees called Him out on it.
 - i. Why would Jesus eat with sinners... with tax collectors who are the scum of the earth?
 1. By the way, tax collectors were often guilty of stealing from those they taxed, along with their alliance with the Roman government which made them despised by the Jews...
 - ii. Why would Jesus call Matthew, a tax collector, to follow Him and be a disciple?
 - iii. Why would Jesus go spend time eating and drinking with those on the fringe of society... and certainly not following the Jewish way of life and God’s law?
 - e. If we pay attention to the Bible, we know the answers to these questions because we understand the reason Jesus came to us... to redeem and restore all people.

f. And yet...

III. **As those called to follow Jesus, our actions do not equal our words.**

- a. It's easy to say we should show mercy to the people around us, but doing it is another story...
 - i. Part of the problem is fear.
 1. We often fear the unknown, the differences in other people, the conversations and discussions we might have, and just getting to know others.
 2. We fear being taken advantage of... we fear people's motives and whether they might harm or steal from us.
 - a. In other words, we don't trust people we don't know.
 - ii. Part of the problem is selfishness.
 1. Sometimes we are so busy and worried about our own issues that we don't look outward to see the struggle of others.
 2. Sometimes we just don't have time to spend on others.
 - iii. Part of the problem is being judgmental and self-righteous.
 1. It's easy to categorize certain people by what they wear or what they are doing – and we may not even go near them.
 2. As I mentioned earlier in my upbringing – we might look at another person seeking help as a sign of weakness, and they should fix their own problems.
 - iv. We have many, many more excuses for not showing mercy – but Jesus comes to us with a radical way of thinking... a world-changing way to act toward others.
- b. I read an excerpt from a historian by the name of Rodney Stark (no relation to Tony Stark – Iron Man 😊).
 - i. But he makes the case that Jesus changed the world because one of the biggest things to get people's attention in the ancient world was the revolutionary way Christianity faithfully showed mercy.
 - ii. He writes: "In the midst of the squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity of ancient cities, Christianity provided an island of mercy and security It started with JesusIn contrast, in the pagan world, and especially among the philosophers, mercy was regarded as a character defect... and pity was regarded as a pathological emotion: because mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it is contrary to justice [Therefore, in their thinking,] humans must learn 'to curb the impulse [to show mercy]', and 'the cry of the undeserving for mercy' must go 'unanswered.' '[Showing mercy] was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and [could only be excused if the person were not mature enough to understand.]'"
 - iii. This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that ... a merciful God calls on humans to be merciful.¹

IV. **A merciful God provides unearned help or relief.**

- a. As we know so many of the stories in the Gospels of Jesus healing and helping... of Him showing compassion and mercy... which one of those stories had a person who deserved... or earned His help?
 - i. The answer is not one...
 - ii. Not one of His disciples deserved to be called...
 - iii. Not one of us deserve His mercy or love...
 - iv. We are all sinners without good in us, but as I said last week from Ephesians 2, “⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5)
 - v. Yes, even Jesus says, “For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (vs 13)
- b. In today’s Gospel, Jesus not only calls Matthew (an unworthy tax collector) to follow Him, but He eats with a group of “unworthy” people.
 - i. The greatest gift a person can have is realizing, “I am one of those people reclining at His table.”
 - ii. Yes, we are the outsiders welcomed in by the grace of God – and because of His love and mercy for even someone like me.
- c. The truth is, Jesus extended His mercy and presence to the whole world throughout time by dying on the cross –
 - i. Because in this act of obedience to the Father, Jesus brought us all into a new relationship with God – by His blood we are right, and we are worthy to be called the Father’s children.
 - ii. That is redemption and restoration... which is ours through faith.

V. **Jesus invites us to His table of mercy.**

- a. Joining together in fellowship with the King of kings and Lord of lords.
- b. Through that connection, and our faith in Him, we gladly risk being merciful to others.
- c. Our sermon hymn today said: “So greatly pardoned, I’ll forgive my brother”; and... “I’ve been so loved that I’ll risk loving, too.”
- d. God has called us, given us faith and forgiveness, He has loved us through it all – and I cannot help but bring those blessings to the people around me.
- e. I don’t just randomly go up to people and say, “Follow me!” like Jesus...
 - i. No, I am connected to many different people through my vocations and stations in life.
 - ii. For each of you, look around and see what that means –
 1. Do you work in a school?
 2. Do you have neighbors or acquaintances?
 3. Do you have activity groups or clubs?
 4. Do you have family and loved ones?

5. Do you have a church family?
6. Do you work with other employees or customers?
- f. We can all look around us and invite people to the table of mercy which Jesus has prepared... where their needs will be met beyond their wildest imagination as they come to know a Savior who loves them dearly.
- g. Come to the table of mercy, and invite the people around you – because we are all outsiders brought together by a merciful and loving God. Amen.

¹ Source: Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, (HarperOne, 2012), page 112