

## "Hold You"

Hosea 5:15-6:6 & Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

June 8, 2008

I suppose that it is an occupational hazard. I read scriptures like we have before us today and I begin to fixate on the details. One could well listen to today's Gospel account and just say, 'Isn't that nice - Jesus heals ... Hallelujah!' ..... or a person could just look at the opening part of the text and say, 'Isn't that nice - Jesus loves sinners ..... can we get an AMEN to that?' It is good stuff - Jesus is good and loving and kind and merciful ..... it's all good. But then right there in the middle of these two little stories Jesus has something to say to us, "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Well, it is simple really, don't you think. Mercy is a good thing - sacrifice ... not so good. Of course, we really aren't big into making sacrifices anyway so that part isn't tough ..... and 'mercy' - - well, 'mercy me' that can't be too tough.

"Go and learn", Jesus says. And so I ponder the words and the images of scripture ..... and I wonder what it is that Jesus is saying to me about how I am to live my life. What does Jesus call us to when He tells us that His desire is for mercy and not sacrifice? What does He mean by suggesting that it is the sick that need the physician - not those who are well. What does it mean that it is sinners whom He calls - not the righteous?

These are amazing texts. In the OT, God has become fed up with the people of Israel. They pretend to be good God fearing folk, they do the religious rituals - they turn to God when it is convenient or when the need is great - but then quickly forget about Him. Now when they hear from the prophet that God has had it with them - but they just say, 'O not to worry, we are too good for God to stay angry for long, we are His people - He will forgive and come running back to us in no time. And God says ..... 'think again!'

Amazing - difficult text - - - where is the mercy in that? The second part is there. Jesus told us that His desire is not for sacrifices and all of the religious rituals ... and that was what the people were really good at. They could run to the Temple and make all kinds of sacrifices ... but there was no depth and sincerity to their relationship to God. What does God want from His people? Isn't it enough that they know that God will be there if they ever really need Him?

We read the stories about Jesus in scriptures like today's Gospel. They are familiar words. Jesus encounters Matthew and invites him to become a follower. We are amazed that he leaves everything to follow. We hear of incredible healings and are

amazed at the power of God. But perhaps we miss the deeper power of the events if we do not consider the depth of the mercy that is demonstrated. We know that tax collectors were despised ... but I don't think that we can really grasp the depth of the hatred that was leveled against those Jews who served the Roman government in that capacity. I wonder what it must have felt like to be so alone - so rejected - so despised. Maybe some of those tax collectors tried to cover those feelings by telling themselves that they were getting rich and then did not need to be liked. Still the rejection must have been hard to endure.

Similar emotions must have filled the woman who suffered with the incurable flow of blood. She must have felt physically ill all of the time but the emotional pain must have been equally intense. Though we can not understand how it could have been, in those times such an illness made a woman so 'ritually unclean' that nobody would dare to even be around her. If she were to happen to touch you - you became unclean. Everyone steered clear of her. Nobody touched her. I don't know what she would have been more interested in - the physical healing or just being touched by someone, anyone.

Jesus sits down to a meal with tax collectors and people who are judged in some way to be sinners. It must have been a thrill for these people who were so ostracized by the good church folk of the day to have this rabbi come to be with them. They were so much on the outside. Simply to go into their home was taboo. But Jesus did it. And when the leader of the synagogue saw that Jesus was there and his daughter was dead he threw all caution to the wind and went to Jesus for help. Imagine that scene - Jesus, sinners and tax collectors, and a leader of the synagogue pouring his heart out. I bet there were a lot of tears as the need was revealed and the outsiders listened with compassion.

"Go and learn what this means." God's desire is for mercy. Mercy for the leader of the synagogue - mercy for tax collectors and sinners - mercy for a woman suffering alone with an incurable medical problem. In the midst of all of the struggles, pain and loneliness God does not seek some religious ritual sacrifice - just mercy.

I know that there is a real danger in sharing too many 'proud grandpa' stories about incredibly cute granddaughters. I do try to restrain myself. But as I was thinking about what it is that Jesus wants us to learn in this lesson - as I ponder this call to 'go and learn', I can't help but think about Skylar [the incredibly cute granddaughter]. Recently, she had the opportunity to go to a rodeo with Shelly. I was not able to be there but Shelly shared with me the fun that she had. She ran back and forth constantly in the bleachers with 'grandma' close behind her - trying desperately to keep her safe. When the danger was too great, Shelly tried to hold her but she squirmed and wanted to be down where she could run free even with all of the unknown horses around. Mostly, the attempts to keep her safe and happy were successful. Unfortunately, there was one little fall and a little bruise resulted. And there were some tears as a result. And in those moments - as in many other moments when Skylar gets tired or things just aren't working out the way she wants

- in those moments Skylar turns to grandma [or grandpa, when I am around] and hold up her arms while saying, "Hold you!" I really don't know what might have the power to melt a grandparents heart as completely as sad eyes and outstretched arms. I don't know of more beautiful words than, "Hold you!" In those moments I want never to say ... 'well, you shouldn't have been running in the bleachers' or 'I've got better things to do' or 'I'm tired of holding you.' No in those moments I just want to pick her up and hold her close and safe.

"Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy ....." It is God's desire and isn't it what we all want. Isn't it what the tax collector's sinners, synagogue leaders and their families, and the woman reaching out for the hem of Jesus' garment all want ..... and need ..... and in the mercy of God receive!

I suspect that some day soon, Skylar will get a better grasp on vocabulary and she will come and say, 'hold me' instead of 'hold you'. I suspect that she has heard us ask, 'Can I hold you', so many times before we pick her up that 'hold you' is her way of asking us to hold her. Personally, I love 'hold you'. I love the idea of this precious child wanting to hold me. And personally, I think that is what God wants as well. Wouldn't it melt God's heart to have us run to Him in those moments when we have fallen or we are simply too tired to know what to do next and just say, I want to hold you, Jesus. I need to hold you. Not some obnoxious attitude that God will simply always be there and He has to take care of us. With arms outstretched and sad eye, we say, 'hold you?' to our God. Then God could do what He does the best - have mercy. .... "Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy!

**AMEN**