

# FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## “Mercy Not Sacrifice”

### Matthew 9: 9-13

I'm a “Golden Oldies” fan. I love the songs of the sixties and early seventies. I listen to them whenever I can. There was a song in the seventies by Norman Greenbaum that you still hear today, especially in commercials. It's called “Spirit in the Sky.” It has a line in it that says, “not a sinner, never sinned. I've got a friend in Jesus.” Frankly, it's not only a bad song, it's bad theology too.

And yet, in a way, it's symptomatic of how some view Christianity in general and the person and work of Jesus in particular. There have been and, I suppose, there always will be some who feel that they and/or others have to measure up to some standard to be a “good” Christian and be Jesus' friend – that you can't be a sinner and be a Christian or Jesus' friend too.

The Pharisees in our gospel lesson for today were like that. Now the Pharisees weren't “bad” people in the typical sense. Actually, they seemed to be quite “good.” They took their religion seriously. They were leaders in their synagogues and communities. They seemed not only to know the “right” thing to do but were more than happy to tell others how to do the “right” thing as well. They were, according to their own standards, “healthy” and in no need of healing – “righteous” and in no need of forgiveness.

All this made them feel somehow more acceptable to God than others. It made them feel like they were friends with God and because they were and what they did was good, those who were not like them and who didn't do what they did were “unacceptable” to God – that they were not God's friends. God only loves the “righteous” they thought. God only loves us and people like us.

And then along comes Jesus who is proclaimed by some to be the very Son of God and the promised Messiah and what does he do? He doesn't associate so much with the so-called “righteous” as much as he does with so-called “sinners.” How outrageous! He must not be who he claims to be if he does stuff like that, they must have thought. After all, they thought they knew God better than anyone and they just knew that this is not the way God would act.

The trouble, of course, was that they really didn't know God at all. It's just that they thought they did. They poured over the law – both God's and man's – until they knew it forwards and backwards. They even added some of their own in order to see that all the laws were kept. But what they really didn't know was God's heart – His love, His mercy, His forgiveness. They had made God over into their own image – the image of the hard taskmaster who has no sympathy for disobedient servants. And certainly this Jesus didn't fit that image.

This Jesus spoke of and acted in love and mercy and forgiveness especially toward those whom the Pharisees labeled “sinners.” And then to top it all off he even pointed the finger at them, the Pharisees, as the ones who had perverted God’s word and will and had not only made themselves fit for hell but everyone else who came into contact with them as well. Sadly, in their zeal to be “righteous”, they had made themselves the very enemies of the God they thought they were serving.

As it was then, so it is now. Those who see God simply as a hard taskmaster who not only demands perfection but also condemns the imperfect out of hand have missed the very point of what Jesus, God’s own Son, is all about. Now, it’s true that God does demand perfection. But in His love for us, His imperfect creatures, He sent His Son to live the perfect life in our stead and to die the death for our imperfections so that now all who repent and turn to Him in faith – all who see themselves not as “righteous” but as “sinners” before Him – might be forgiven for Jesus’ sake and, in that, be judged “righteous” through the forgiveness of their sins. As Scripture has said, “it’s not the law that justifies us before God, rather it’s faith in the One who kept the law for us that justifies.”

The Pharisees didn’t understand that, and, frankly, it would appear many today – both inside and outside the church – don’t seem to understand that either. There are still those today who feel that who they are and what they do makes them right with God. For those inside the church that may mean simply being a member on a roster somewhere, if in name only, or, if they are involved with the life of the church, they think their involvement merits something extra from God. And for those outside the church that may mean simply trying to be a “good” person, at least as the world judges such things, and perhaps even looking down their noses at those whom they judge as “not good enough.” It’s to those inside and outside the church that God still says today, “go and learn what it means that I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

Certainly God seeks to be merciful to one and all – even to the Pharisees of then and now. But only those who acknowledge their need, who acknowledge their unworthiness before God, who throw themselves on God’s mercy for Jesus’ sake, who seek to live out that mercy in their relationship both with God and with others, only they are open to receiving by faith what God stands ready to give in mercy – that is, forgiveness, life and salvation.

But those who like the Pharisees of our text are smug in their self-righteousness, in who they are and in what they do, who neither throw themselves on God’s mercy nor seek to live out that mercy in their relationship with God and others, close themselves off from receiving anything from God except judgment and His temporal wrath and eternal punishment.

Jesus refused to live by the “self-righteousness” of the Pharisees. Rather, he welcomed all to live by His righteousness and to follow him. He still welcomes sinners today and invites them to live by the righteousness that comes from God by grace through faith in him. He invites them, having received the mercy of God, to be merciful to others; having

received the love of God to love others even those who are despised and rejected by the rest of the world; having received the care and concern of God to share that care and concern with all, especially the lonely, the weak and the powerless. He invites us to do just that this coming week.

May God bless us as we respond to that invitation again today by faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.