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MERCY AND NOT SACRIFICE

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Twice in the Gospel of St. Matthew (9:13; 12:7), our Lord quotes this passage from Hosea: "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice…" There is more to the passage. Whether Jesus did not think it necessary to quote the entire passage, or Matthew left it off, Hosea completes the thought this way, "…and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." In either case, Jesus means what Hosea means; the knowledge of God is the knowledge of mercy.

Jesus confronted the Pharisees with this passage. They had allowed their religious zeal to take the form of passing judgment on others. They had forgotten to show mercy.

But Jesus came for the sake of mercy. It is the sick that need the physician, he said. And, even on the Sabbath, the hungry should be fed.

The Pharisees were zealous for God, that God's law not be broken. But in their zeal they expanded the law into their own traditions, and their traditions became equal, in mind and practice, to the law of God.

Jesus was zealous for something else. He was concerned more for the sinners who broke the law than for the fact that the law had been broken. For Jesus, as for Hosea, it was not keeping the ritual law that was of primary importance. What truly mattered was the conduct of the heart, because God made the heart for himself. The law was given to keep the heart in check.

And so how one man treated another proved the sincerity of his religion. It was not the law but the soul that mattered. It was obvious to all that mankind had broken the law of God and failed both God and man. But once a man experienced the mercy of God, and thereafter lived mercifully in relation to other men, then his offering to God could be a true sacrifice. To perform the ritual, without a heart of mercy, was to miss what true religion was all about.

What was of greatest importance was the nature of God who gave the law. True knowledge of him meant that one would have mercy on others just as God does on us. It was, after all, his mercy that provided the means of sacrifice to begin with.

You may want to remind me at this point that God is holy and just, and the law, therefore, holy and righteous and good, as St. Paul says (Romans 7:12). Mercy and justice are both within the character of God. And this is no doubt true, but there is something to be understood here.

The law had the result of convicting us of sin, and justice, a strict and sheer application of justice, would leave us all condemned. Christ alone could and does save us from sin. It was he who kept the law perfectly from his heart. And therefore his offering to the Father on our behalf was a satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. What moved God to do this for us was not the supremacy of justice, but justice that was moved by love.

The holiness and purity of God are not abstractions. Holiness and purity are the mode of his life that holds secure his goodness and love. And so, in the end, the law is fulfilled by love, says St. Paul (Romans 13:8-10).

In his great work, Cur Deus Homo, St. Anselm makes this point clearly. God's justice is his setting right what has gone wrong in order to satisfy the intention of his love.

And so Jesus, following Hosea, can say "I desire mercy and not sacrifice (and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.)"

Mercy is something we should spend more time thinking about and doing. We would prefer sacrifice, like an extraordinary contribution to the church, whether it be more money than we normally give, or more time. Whether money or time, we render to God this burnt offering. And this is good.

But what is much more difficult is to have mercy. At the point where we have been offended, or we deem the actions of another to be wrong, or even when something has happened that is clearly seen by everyone to be wrong, we are alert to pass judgment. It feels good to assume righteous indignation. The law was broken and people were hurt. It is difficult to show mercy. And so we fall quickly into the shadows of our own opinions. Oh my, how we live amidst the shadows!

But this should not be so. What our Lord would have us do is to live in the knowledge of him, and therefore not only to seek justice, but to be merciful, and in keeping mercy to heal the sick of soul and to feed the hungry and so to restore ourselves to God and to each other. Micah the prophet declares, "O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (6:8).

I want you to pause now and remember the many times in the Holy Communion service when we are recalled to the fact of God's mercy.

We begin with the responses to the Ten Commandments. "Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law."

We say it again when we hear the summary of the Law. We know we fall short in the love of God and our neighbor and so we pray, "Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us."

At the beginning of the "Prayer for the whole state of Christ's Church," we humbly beseech God "most mercifully" to accept our alms and oblations.

In the General Confession we cry, "Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father, forgive us all that is past…"

In the Absolution we hear, "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all those who with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him; have mercy upon you…"

In the prayer of Consecration we begin, "All glory be to thee, Almighty God our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ…" Later in the consecration, at the moment of the Invocation we say, "And we most humbly beseech thee, O merciful Father, to hear us…" We continue in the next paragraph, "And we earnestly desire thy fatherly goodness, mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving…"

And in the Prayer of Humble Access we say finally, "We do not presume…O merciful Lord… (and then) …But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy."

The sum total is this. We draw close to God in his communion through his mercy. And if this is our knowledge of God, and there is no other, then we cannot help but show mercy ourselves. And as we do we are comforted, remembering that Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5: 7).

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