

“What God Wants From You”

June 22, 2008

Dr. Kipp Wolfe

Matthew 9:9-13

A week ago Saturday night our daughter and son-in-law, Sara and Ryan, and their girls, Jacey and Allie, came to have supper with us. Suzanne fixed a wonderful meal. It was so good, in fact, that we decided we needed to go for a walk afterwards to walk off some of the meal. We took a long walk. We went by a park and the girls played in the park for a while. When we got back to the house, we set up some lawn chairs in the driveway. It was a nice evening to sit outside. We all sat down, all of us that is, except Allie. You have to understand this about Allie—she'll be two next month—most of us have a bowl of cereal for breakfast. I think Allie has a bowl of gunpowder. She is always on the go.

While we were sitting and visiting, Allie was running all over the place. One place she went to look was up on the front porch. On our front porch are two brick columns, square columns on either side. On one side just next to the garage there is a space about as wide as a child's head. See where I'm headed with this? She discovered that space and stuck her head in the space and was looking around. While she was looking around, she turned her head sideways and decided to back out of the space. But guess what, she was stuck. The harder she pulled, the “stucker” she got. She started to scream. Now hold that thought. I'm going to come back to Allie later in the sermon, but now we go from Allie to Matthew.

In Oklahoma we understand about crooked politicians, don't we? On the front page recently, we see our state auditor has been convicted of criminal activity. If you read any of those articles . . . surprise, surprise . . . guess who else was involved in the story? A man by the name of Gene Stipe. That name seems to always show up where there's criminal activity involved.

Matthew makes crooked politicians look like choir boys. He wasn't just a tax collector. Understand this, we all have our feelings about the Internal Revenue Service, but I feel a little bit different about the Internal Revenue Service because of this: for several years, believe it or not, my mother worked for the Internal Revenue Service. She was what was known as a “tax representative.” She was one of the people who answered the 800 number when people called the IRS for advice. She used to love to tell

us stories about how people used to call in and ask for advice and she would save them money on their taxes—some of them thousands of dollars. Think about an IRS agent saving you money on your taxes.

Matthew was more than just an IRS agent. He was an agent of the Roman government. Because of that, the Jewish people hated Matthew and all men like Matthew. He not only collected taxes, he collected more than the taxes. He was crooked. He was dishonest. He was so low on the social scale that he had been cast out of the Synagogue. Tax collectors were not allowed to enter the Synagogue. So what does Jesus do? Jesus calls Matthew to be one of the Twelve, one of his closest friends.

When Jesus calls Matthew, we read in Mark and Luke's gospel that Matthew threw a party at his house. He invited several of his tax collector friends, and we read that there were also other sinners present. J.B. Phillips calls them disreputable people. It's not hard to imagine the group. Tax collectors, harlots . . . it was a tough crowd. As the Pharisees observed this, they said to the disciples of Jesus, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Now remember, in this part of the world, table fellowship was a sign of acceptance. If you ate at someone's table or if you invited someone else to eat at your table, it was a sign that you accepted them. The Pharisees had tried so hard to be good. They tried so hard, in fact, that they ended up being good for nothing. The just couldn't understand why Jesus would associate with these people. When Jesus hears them ask the disciples, he repeats the familiar words that we all know: "Those who are well have no need of a physician. "

In Alcoholics Anonymous, the first of the 12 steps is to admit that you are powerless over alcohol. In other words, you admit that you have a problem. You admit you have an illness. The Pharisees were not able to recognize their own illness. Because of this they didn't think they needed the one known as "The Great Physician."

In response to the words of the Pharisees, Jesus quotes Hosea. These are not original words to Jesus. Jesus says to the Pharisees, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." This word mercy is an interesting word. You might want to write this word down on your bulletin. There is a word called hesed. It is the word Hosea used. "I desire Hesed, not sacrifice." Hesed is the steadfast love of God. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." When we apply these words to a Christian context, see what happens. What is it that's at the very heart of our faith? The cross, the ultimate symbol of sacrifice. Jesus is saying, "I desire from you mercy and not sacrifice. More than your time, I desire mercy. More than your talent, I desire mercy.

More than your service I desire mercy. More than your money, I desire mercy.”

Jesus understood how much we all need mercy. It is our common need this day. We come into the church – nearly all of us –with some kind of hidden, unpleasant thing from our past. Perhaps no one knows about this other than God. We have said or done something that we regret. We think if anyone else knew about this we would be so ashamed we could never show our face again. We all need mercy.

Our need for mercy is outweighed only by our need to share mercy. This is why Jesus says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” We need to hear these words, especially in the church. I believe what Matthew is saying here is a word for the church. In the church we are called to be merciful. It doesn’t say that; it seems like an individual kind of thing, but we know there are no solitary Christians. The guy who says” It’s just me, God, and the Bible” doesn’t understand that we got the Bible from the church. There are no solitary Christians.

Jesus is addressing what I believe is the greatest failure in the church—the fact that we have so often been unmerciful instead of merciful. Think about how often in the church we have said to those outside the church, “We’re just a little bit better than you.” Instead of a word of mercy, it has been a word of criticism, condemnation, or judgment. How often in the church have we looked inward instead of outward, not sharing the mercy that the world so desperately needs.

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” There is this good news in spite of our failures. There is this hope. Jim Wallis has said something fascinating about “hope” that I love. Jim Wallis says, “Hope is trusting in God in spite of all of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.” Don’t you love that? “Hope is trusting in God in spite of the evidence and then watching ourselves change.”

Back to Allie. I don’t want to leave her there stuck on the porch. It was really just a second or two. She screamed and cried and Ryan was sitting right there. He jumped up, got her head turned sideways and she came right out. There was no problem. That seems silly to us—to stick your head in a space and get stuck, but let me tell you some things that are even sillier.

In the reporting on the floods in the past few weeks, have you noticed what the reporters in the field do? They don’t just stand by the water, do they? They stand *in* the water. Isn’t that silly? Do you know what’s in that water? To make it more real the reporters stand in the water when they give their report.

I'll tell you something even sillier than that. In the past few weeks I've noticed just south of us in the Blue Cross building they must have some kind of corporate wellness program going. Several employees are outside of the building each morning, walking. They are dressed in their work clothes, but they are wearing tennis shoes. They have the lanyard with the name badge and there will be groups—three, four, six, eight, even 10 out walking. I'm sure there might be some kind of bonus involved.

It's interesting to watch them as they visit. Occasionally someone will be on their cell phone. The other day I saw two of the women walking, and do you know what one of the women was doing? As she was walking, she was smoking a cigarette—on her health walk. Is that about the silliest thing you have ever heard?

Let me tell you something even sillier. It is sillier to believe that we can follow Christ and not be merciful. There are persons all around us, sometimes those closest to us, who need mercy. So often it seems we are reluctant to share it.

Let me tell you another word that is better than the word "hesed." It is the word "ruth." I'm not talking about the Ruth in the Bible. Usually we use this word in another context. When we talk about someone who is mean and heartless, we say, "He (or she) is ruthless." The word "ruth" means compassion, empathy, and mercy. The Good News that I share with you today is this: We believe in a God of ruth—a god of mercy. Even better, you have been created in God's image. You have "ruth" in you, and God expects you to share that ruth.

Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me." That didn't mean walk beside me or walk in front of me. That meant "follow me; follow my example." The living Christ this day says to each of us, "Follow me." Amen