
If I Could Touch But Just the Hem of His Garment: I Desire Mercy and Not Sacrifice

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 5A

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

I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Hosea 6:6

*As I go down to the river Jordan,
Just to bathe my wearisome soul,
If I could touch but just the hem of his garment, good Lord,
I believe, good Lordy I believe, it would make me whole.*

Maybe you remember that old bluegrass song. (Maybe you remember hearing it being sung so much better than how I just sang it!). Oh, so many songs I have sung over the years! “If I could touch but just the hem of his garment, I would be whole.” The garment is the garment of mercy and righteousness. If I could just touch the hem of the garment of mercy and steadfast love.

It is the same garment that another prophet, Isaiah (61.10), sang about, the garment of salvation. It is the that mercy which the prophet Hosea sings about in the famous passage we heard this morning.

Hosea 6:6. “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,” he said. And it can be translated “mercy.” “I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Well, this passage of Hosea is part of another song I used to sing. The very first lines of Hosea, chapter 6, were so striking to me that I once made them into a song when I was young. I will not sing it today! But the song has the same words of our Hosea passage this morning:

“Let us know, let us press on, to know the Lord,” I sang,
“His going forth is as certain as the dawn:
And he shall come to us as the rain,
As the spring rain that watereth the earth.”

And, oh, how I pressed to know the Lord in those days. I was around so many people who claimed to know the Lord. And many of them did.

“Let us press on to know the Lord.” I loved that verse so much, that I had it engraved inside the wedding ring that I gave to my wife. And it’s also engraved on the wedding ring she gave to me. “Hosea 6:3.”

How do we know? How do we know that we know the Lord? How do we know if we are even pressing close? We have so many people these days who claim to know about the Lord. But not so many give evidence that they know the Lord. How can we tell?

Well, I believe that people who know the Lord understand the further lines of the prophet Hosea, chapter 6. The lines that say, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

If there is one verse that summarizes the teaching of the prophets, and even the teaching of Jesus, and if that verse is not “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” then it is this verse: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” The word is actually the beautiful Hebrew word, hesed, “steadfast love” or “mercy”

In short, the knowledge of God is good, and burnt offerings are not good. Mercy is good, and sacrifices are not good.”

According to the gospel of Matthew, this verse is quoted twice by Jesus, including today’s gospel selection after people complained that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners,” Jesus says. Jesus came for the outsiders, the ones left out.

The religious and political officials of Jesus’s day were so concerned with proper burnt offerings, proper sacrifices, proper rituals, proper order, that that order had become empty and void.

Jesus came to have mercy on those who could not make the customary proper offerings. Jesus came to have mercy. And in this passage from Matthew 9, Jesus turns to person after person, and has mercy on them, starting with the woman who had been bleeding for so long.

People who know God understand these holy words: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

There is a simple way to define what empty sacrifice is. Empty sacrifice is simply needless killing, the needless shedding of blood. We do not need any more sacrifice.

Today, we don’t need any more sacrifice, to make ourselves right with God, or right with each other, or right with the world. We don’t need death, to prove ourselves. We don’t need the sacrifice of young soldiers. We don’t need the sacrifice of peaceful activists. We don’t need death. God does not care for the killing of boatsmen in the Caribbean or sailors in the Indian Ocean. That kind of action does not lead us to knowledge of God.

For much of human civilization, for too long, sacrifice has been interpreted as killing something: a lamb, an ox, a turtle dove. But with that kind of principle, it is not a far step to make the tragic transition to people. Today, we do not need to kill people. We do not need to disparage people. We do not need to make people scapegoats. We do not need to blame people. Because God desires mercy and not sacrifice.

It’s right there in the Bible, Hosea 6:6. And Jesus repeats it in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 9. “Go and learn what this means,” he says. Then, three chapters later, chapter 12 describes another incident, in which Jesus says, “If you had only known what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

The knowledge of God is mercy. The knowledge of God is to know what it is to be forgiven. The knowledge of God is to know what it is to forgive. Forgiveness is the opposite of vengeance and retribution. Retribution, human retribution, does not give us knowledge of God.

“Let us know, let us press on, to know the Lord.”

Oh, I know that none of us reaches the perfect in learning to forgive. We have a long way to go. But we Christians – as we learn to be forgiven and as we learn to forgive – are just touching the surface. “If I could touch but just the hem of his garment, good Lord, I believe, Good Lordy I believe, it would make me whole.” If I could touch just a bit of forgiveness, just a touch of mercy, just the hem of steadfast love, I believe I could be whole.

It is not the beautiful ceremony and grand ritual of church that gives us knowledge of God. It is the celebration of mercy and love in those holy acts or worship. It is not even weekly church or daily prayer that gives us knowledge of God. It is the daily acts or mercy and steadfast love that are larger than sacrifices and burnt offerings.

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings,” says the prophet Hosea. And Jesus repeats those words. Mercy. And we repeat those words when we sing, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.”

Mercy stops the shedding of blood. Mercy stops the shedding of blood. We do not need burnt offerings; we do not need to burn things up.

*If I could touch but just the hem of his garment,
I believe, good Lordy I believe, it would make me whole.*

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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