

“Mercy, Not Sacrifice: An Affair of the Heart”

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I was in my kitchen this past Monday morning fixing breakfast, half-listening to reporters discussing the recent turbulence in Senator Obama's former church, when one of the CNN reporters said somewhat offhand—“And I can even go to sleep in *my* church.”

You can imagine my gut reaction to that. But maybe there are people here who at sermon time just relax and hope it's a comfortable time, even if you wouldn't want anyone to think you were sleeping!

If you ever do feel like you're getting drowsy when you hear the bible lessons and the sermon, there's something wrong. Some years ago Dorothy Sayers, known for her Lord Peter Whimsy detective novels as well as a gifted writer on Christianity, wrote an essay entitled “The Dogma is the Drama.” In this, she argued for the excitement of the Bible stories about Jesus. She explains why we may have forgotten such excitement, because “We have effectively pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him ‘meek and mild’ and recommended him as a household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.”

Well, I don't know how any one could read the Gospel for this Sunday and come away with any image of a “meek and mild” Jesus. Far from it! Here in this passage is only a sample of the way that Jesus turned old truths and expectations inside out and challenged his followers to open their eyes and hearts to new possibilities.

“Follow Me” he says to Matthew with the same low-key but imperious word that had unlocked Peter, Andrew, James and John from their nets, boats, and parents, to break out of their creature comforts and certainties of religion “by the book”. He says “follow me” with the power to change the lives of all those who would gather around him.

That sounds reasonable to us now, but it was certainly upsetting in the Gospel scene this morning. The problem was that Matthew was a *tax collector*, about as low as one could get on any “most admired” list, and his acceptance of Jesus' invitation to dinner drew other questionable people to the feast. It was no surprise that the “by the book” Pharisees had to challenge him, asking Jesus' disciples “why would your teacher associate with such people like these tax collectors?”

At first Jesus tries the practical approach. “I do this, he says, precisely because they are sinners and need help,” he says. But then he goes beyond just trying to reason with the Pharisees, and aligns his teaching and indeed his whole being with words from the prophet Hosea, “Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

This of course is the quotation from the book of Hosea in our first lesson this morning, a revelation of God that had come to the prophet Hosea through the agony of his relationship with his wayward wife Gomer: that in spite of all we do and no matter how much we have lost our way, God's baseline desire is for steadfast love and healing of relationships. Jesus now commits himself and his ministry in that direction, not only in his teaching, but what he does, as we will see in what follows in this passage of Jesus' healing touch for the woman and the girl.

In all of this Jesus is clearly stating his priority of reaching out and inclusion, going beyond the boundaries of separation and religious identification. If this is not clear enough for you, go back to Jesus' Good Samaritan story of who it was that took care of the injured man in the ditch. Any good Sunday School student knows it was NOT the religious establishment, the priests and the Levites, but the Samaritan who was historically and culturally beyond the social and religious boundaries, who came to minister to the injured traveler, and to live out God's priority of mercy. What Jesus is calling for is not the usual offering of a disciplined church member, but instead acts of the heart, reaching out to others.

There are many ways to describe how that might occur, but I want to tell you of an experience of such reaching out in what happened right in our church office about two weeks ago. I was talking with Parke Brown, our treasurer and children's chapel leader when there appeared at my office door Rabbi Nissan Antine, Associate Rabbi of Beth Shalom the orthodox synagogue, our next door neighbor. Rabbi Antine had just stopped by to introduce himself and bring greetings from our closest neighbor—with whom we have had just four contacts in the last ten years, all friendly and cooperative but obviously limited in scope and impact.

It was Parke who asked the rabbi if he knew the movie, "Paper Clips." I had never heard of the movie (but Don Mullins says it's a wonderful story and he's shown the movie to our youth group.) Rabbi Antine was surprised by Parke's question about "Paper Clips" and replied, "Yes, I've just seen it, and it was that movie that prompted me to come by and introduce myself!" We had a brief but very pleasant conversation, and later I went to Google to find out all I could about "Paper Clips" and what inspired that documentary movie,

How many of you have seen or know about this film? You may want to go yourself to Google this afternoon and search for not just the film but an article in the October 2003 issue of the Washingtonian which tells of the ways that a number of interesting people right here in this area who have had their lives touched by the remarkable story of "Paper Clips."

This documentary is about an 8th grade language arts class in Whitwell, Tennessee, a small rural community with no Jews, no Catholics, and only a handful of blacks and Hispanics. This group of white, Protestant, and what might be called "redneck" children were inspired by their school principal, a tireless, indefatigable older woman named

Linda Hooper, not only to learn about the Holocaust in Europe but to do something to inspire those students to open their eyes to the world beyond their insulated Tennessee valley. What happened would change the students, the teachers, their families and the entire town forever...and eventually open hearts and minds around the world.

What did they do? This small middle-school class decided to honor every lost soul by collecting 11 million paperclips representing each individual exterminated by the Nazis—6 million Jews and 5 million Gypsies. (Why paper clips? Because paper clips were invented in Norway and Norwegians wore paper clips during the war as a silent protest against Hitler.

It's an amazing story of how such a school class could organize such a project, and the amazing result was a memorial boxcar filled with 11 million of the 29 million paper clips that came in from all over America, gradually at first and then snowballing from national publicity from 1998 to 2003. They even had Holocaust survivors who accepted the invitation to come to Whitwell, Tennessee to give first-hand accounts to the school and community. As reporters commented, it was "an unforgettable lesson on how a committed group of children and educators can change the world, one classroom at a time." It was not just about a tragedy, but how it can be prevented in the future.

Reading about this film, which I did after the conversation with Parke and the rabbi, I can certainly understand why this documentary has won so many awards at film festivals across the country. But more importantly than that I can appreciate in a more profound way what Jesus lived and taught, an eternal truth that the prophet Hosea had to discern from his own experience, that God's first priority is a quality of mercy that goes beyond all of boundaries of history and culture that have separated us in the past.

When the documentary crew went to Whitwell to learn more about this project from the school principal Linda Hooper she concluded their discussion by asking, "Now can you feel the souls?" That of course is the real question!

At the deepest level "Mercy" is not something one just reads a bible passage about, it is NOT a good spiritual discipline like prayer, almsgiving, or fasting, but it is an affair of the heart, a matter of creating in all of us a spirit of caring and generosity towards others, especially those who may have never "come across our radar screen" before.

Rabbi Nissan Antine, a rabbi of an orthodox synagogue, from the strictest branch of Judaism, took the initiative and time to come by to visit, and then to tell us how this movie inspired him to walk down the street and introduce himself to us. I don't know what will come of that new relationship. I don't know what will happen after you hear this sermon today. But I do know that whatever happens in the days and weeks to come, it will not be just some good thing you have learned. It will be how your soul has been touched by this story. Mercy is an affair of the heart! AMEN