

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 7, 2026

Text: Matthew 9:9-13

“Having Mercy”

I was nine years old when my family moved from Victoria to Edmonton. Before that, I had played one season of soccer. It was recess time at my new school, and I was excited to see our teachers throw some soccer balls into the field for us to play. Soon though, I was frustrated by my new friends' play. Instead of moving the ball with their feet, some of them picked it up to kick or even throw it to others. “That’s not fair!”, I thought. “You aren’t playing by the rules.”

The Pharisees were frustrated with Jesus because He didn’t seem to play by the rules either. After calling a tax collector named Matthew to follow Him, Jesus accepted an invitation to a feast with a houseful of his friends. The Pharisees would never share such a meal with Matthew and his company. Tax collectors, prostitutes, and other ne’er-do-wells were unacceptable because they didn’t live in line with God’s law. Pharisees kept themselves separate from those who were uninterested in seeking God by keeping His commands. “To be holy, keep God’s holy law, and to stay holy, avoid the unholy.” So, what was Jesus doing by accepting hospitality from a tax collector?

When He heard some Pharisees ask His disciples that question, Jesus responded first with a medical analogy: *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”* Jesus subtly invited His

critics to take a second look at His behaviour. What was Jesus doing at that meal? Serving as a healer for ill. But why would He do that for sinners? What did they merit besides scorn, rebuke, and a cold shoulder for their wickedness?

Jesus followed that with a reprimand of His own for them. *“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’”* The Pharisees were the religious teaching class of Israel, the experts on God’s Word, but Jesus turned around and gave them a homework assignment. Ouch! Then He concluded His answer to their question with a declaration: *“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”* Double ouch! Who were the righteous, but the law-abiding Pharisees? Shouldn’t they be the first to receive Jesus’ praise?

Jesus wasn’t playing by the rules, thought the Pharisees. Just what playbook was He using? The answer lies in the lesson Jesus gave them to learn. *“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”* In the name of the LORD, Hosea preached those very words to people of Israel in the eighth century BC. For two hundred years, Israel had been a nation awash in idolatry. It begun with their first king, Jeroboam. After he led the ten tribes north of Judah to independence, he established two shrines in Bethel and in Dan. He did this to secure his power over the land, for he didn’t want his people to return to Jerusalem in Judah to worship. But Jeroboam had neither God’s command nor promise of blessing for the action, so the shrines he built, complete with golden calf statues and his own hand-picked priests, hosted

a religion to a false god, not the LORD of Israel, but the god of Israel's independence from Judah.

Israel's worship at Dan and Bethel was like all other idol worship. It was based on the false belief that divine favour could be bought with sacrifice. It opened the gates for a flood of idolatry in Israel. Shrines to the gods of the Canaanites and other neighbouring nations sprung up all over the land.

Hosea was one of many prophets God sent to preach against Israel's idolatrous worship, its greed, and its violence. He warned the nation that God was near to posting its eviction notice. The rising eastern power of Assyria would serve as God's instrument to punish His people for their rejection of Him.

Yet Hosea also preached that God had a another, better word for His people to hear. In today's reading from the prophet, we heard him proclaim a promise of forgiveness to urge Israel to repent of its idolatry:

*“Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord;
his going out is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth...*

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”*

The LORD had not rescued the descendants of Israel from slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness for forty years, and brought them into the Promised Land only to cast them away centuries later as the war dead and exiles of Assyrian conquest. God chose Israel as His people because He is *“a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...”* (Exodus 34:6-7). The LORD desired that His people know and trust in His steadfast love and mercy rather than slavishly making faithless sacrifices to earn His favour.

That is what Jesus wanted the Pharisees to discover in Hosea’s words: *“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”* Like the people of ancient Israel, the Pharisees, for all their vast knowledge and strict practice of the law of Moses and Israel’s elders, did not really know God at all. Here was Jesus, God in human flesh, calling a tax collector as a disciple and reclining to eat with sinners, and they thought that He was in the wrong.

The Pharisees only knew God through His law. That law is good. God had given it to their ancestors through Moses. But it was not God’s only gift to His people: God had given Himself to them to be their God, and He had chosen them to be His people. This was not a law. It was a promise for them to trust, so that they always know that their God was good

and merciful. By faith they could worship and serve God as His law commanded.

By trusting in their keeping of the law instead of God, the Pharisees were living in idolatry. By holding that God's favour was a reward to be earned instead of a gift received through faith, they imagined Him into an angry god who only rejects those that disobey Him. They thought that they were serving God well by criticizing Jesus for being merciful and kind to sinners. Eventually they would even feel justified in conspiring to have Jesus killed. But Christ's steadfast love would prevail. Through His sacrifice on the cross, God's mercy is given to us all.

To know God truly and to live with Him eternally there are two divine words that we must hear and heed. Blessed be God for the gift of His law! It is the Word of God that tells us who are in relation to God our Creator and before the people with whom we live. God's commands lay out the path of life. They teach us what it means to be human. They also hold before us the crushing truth that none of us fully keep them. We all fall short, miss the mark, rebel, and misuse God's law because we are by nature turned against Him and our neighbours and turned in on ourselves. In Hosea's words, God law "hews" and "slays" us by accusing us of sin from which we cannot redeem ourselves (6:5). No sacrifice or act of obedience can silence its charges against us.

Jesus is our Redeemer, for He shed His blood and gave His life for our sin. Our debt is paid in full. Jesus was crucified for our sins and raised

from the dead to set us right with God. He is the physician who heals our sin-sickness. In mercy, He calls us to follow Him. He walks right into our lives to recline and eat with us, fully forgiving our sins because He carried them into death and the grave for us. He took us into Himself, as His own and washed us with water and His word of grace through baptism. We are God's children through faith in Christ. Christ's righteousness is ours, giving us good consciences and confidence to pray, praise and give thanks to God, knowing that He, our Loving Father, hears and helps us, gives us our daily bread, forgives our sins that we may forgive those who sin against us, supports us through temptations, and delivers us from the evil one. By faith in God's mercy in Jesus, we live.

God desires mercy rather than sacrifice. He is merciful to us, so that we can be merciful to our neighbours by trusting in His mercy. In this time, when God's law has been rewritten, rejected or forgotten by our neighbours, we are sorely tempted to fall into the frustrated ways of the Pharisees. How can people not believe in God? How can they think that suicide is OK, as long as it is carried out in a hospital? How can people be so proud of themselves that they imagine they can be and do whatever they want, even though it defies God's creative will? These questions reveal our frustration with those who don't play by the same rules as us. God forbid that they become our justification for separating ourselves from sinners, and pointing our fingers to condemn their sin.

God has mercy on us, so let us extend His mercy freely to all people. Grateful for Christ's mercy, let us pray for our neighbours' salvation instead of complaining about their shortcomings. Let us befriend others and build relationships with them. Let us invite friends to join us in worship that they may hear the teaching of God's law and the promise of Christ's forgiveness. Let us faithfully follow Jesus, our Great Physician and Lord of Mercy. Amen.