

Mercy!

A Sermon for Pilgrim Church

June 18, 2023

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Matthew 9:9-13

9:9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

9:10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

9:11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

9:12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

9:13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

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Mercy, it's Father's Day. How did we get to June 18 already?

Mercy, mercy, mercy.

Usually, I give our greeting card parent holidays little attention in worship. Their observation is often quite commercial - and in the case of both of the parent oriented days, offering too much emphasis can lead to pain. Tenderness for those who have lost parents; tension for those with difficult parental relationships; grief for those who have longed to be parents.

And yet - many of us are deeply grateful for the gifts of our fathers. So, there are two reasons I'm going to focus on some of the gifts of fathers today.

First: our text brings to mind a word in Hebrew that is the most complete descriptor of God's love that I know of. And that word is both a gift to us and a calling for us, from God.

Second: one of our members recently shared with me a remembrance of his own father, and I asked him if I could share a portion of his words, as a gift of remembrance today. We'll get to that in a moment.

Together, I offer this combination with an idea: these are just three of the gifts of fathers, heavenly and earthly. Mercy, Passion, and Strength.

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Mercy.

Jesus spoke of his father's love often. And in this morning's passage, he spoke of the kind of love his Abba desired of humanity. Calling the Pharisees to be merciful toward Matthew a tax collector, Jesus quoted the prophet Hosea: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' In Hosea, the Hebrew that becomes *mercy* here is *chesed*. *Chesed* cannot be translated with any one word. It means steadfast love. It means mercy. It means loving kindness. And in the Hebrew bible *chesed* means both the kind of love God gives freely to humanity, and the kind of love God calls humanity to practice. *Chesed* - that is to say mercy and steadfast love and charity and kindness - are God the Father's gift to us and commission for us. And so Jesus wants us to follow Abba's *chesed*: the second chance he offers to Matthew the tax collector is the same gift of *chesed* that God the father gives.

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Passion.

One gift human fathers often give their children is their excitement and enthusiasm. I've noticed this in our household: John gave to Zac a passion for music and a passion for math and science. In my childhood, both my Dad and my Pop gave me a deep enthusiasm for reading - I credit them for the stacks of dozens of books always piled around me. (And that gift, in part, led me here.)

One of our Pilgrim members, Bruce Nickerson, wrote an essay about the gifts his father gave him - and I'd like to share an excerpt about how his father's gift of passion for choral music became a gift that touched Bruce's whole life:

Bruce describes very specific gifts he received from his father, who passed away when Bruce was in high school.

His father gave him the gift of poetry, and stage presence. Bruce goes on to describe a third gift:

*From: Gifts from My Father, by Bruce Nickerson*

“The other, and greatest, gift was choral music. Dad took me to audition for the boys’ choir at Grace Episcopal Church, and I was accepted. The initial attraction was the pay! We were compensated ten cents for attending each weekly rehearsal and twenty-five cents on the Sundays when we sang at the service. That was big money, since a dime would buy a comic book or two Hershey bars. I still remember the first Sunday we sang. We were each dressed in a short white surplice, with a large red bow on the front. It was the first Sunday in Advent (the four weeks before Christmas). The anthem was an arrangement of the hymn “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”, set to a tune that I now know as Sicilian Mariners Hymn.

Despite the pay, I only sang with Grace Episcopal for one year. The following year I joined St. Dunstan Boys Choir, a concert choir travelling to venues throughout the Low Country of eastern South Carolina. I was able to sing with this chorus until I was 13 (when my voice became unreliable). Once an adult register was consistently established, I was able to sing with the glee club and chapel choir at boarding school and then at college.

The gift of having learned to be a choral singer has been a blessing throughout my life, even into these senior years. It is a gift that has helped bind me with Fran for more than 60 years of marriage. While I do not have the talent to sing with the

chorus of a major symphony, Fran and I have sung together in all our church choirs, and in community choral groups throughout the country...

I did not know my father well – but three gifts from my father have continued to support me throughout my life.”

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Strength.

Pastors like to preach three point sermons, so let me offer a third gift of fathers, earthly and divine. A third gift but by no means the last or least. Strength. Strength, fortitude, perseverance.

God, give me strength, we pray. The Lord is our strength; and God says, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you...” (Isaiah 41)

One of the earliest celebrations of Father’s Day was in 1910. “Credit for originating the holiday is generally given to Sonora Smart Dodd of Spokane, Washington, whose father, a Civil War veteran, raised her and her five siblings after their mother died in childbirth.”<sup>1</sup> No matter how many parents there are in a house, raising six children takes strength. No wonder this daughter wanted to celebrate her father.

My own Pop modeled strength, fortitude and perseverance. At age 15 he was suddenly responsible for his family’s wellbeing, in the midst of the Great Depression. He did it because he had to - and throughout his life, he was strong and steady when we needed him to be, and so I received the gift of strength.

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Strength, Passion, Mercy.

Not all of us received these gifts from our fathers -

And there are far more than these three gifts from God, whom we know as Father.

But these are indeed holy gifts -

And gifts for us to share.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fathers-Day>