

Proper 5a
 Mt 9.9-13
 June 8, 2008
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Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me," and he rose and followed him.

In + Nomine Patris.

ONE of the thousand things I dread is the arrival of summer time. We move from the truly glorious Charleston winter weather of brisk mornings and cozy, dark evenings by a fire to days like today where just standing in the sunshine is out of the question; and even being in here where the A/C is pumping out cold air non-stop, wearing brocade vestments is so uncomfortable that Father Dow has long since stopped worrying about being beautiful in them; and were it not for fear of the Anglo-Catholic Vestment Police, he would have them off. But I can tell you, as the Anglo-Catholic Vestment Police Chief—he's already in enough trouble with us. I'm just grateful today that I can be beautiful for you in the simplicity of this surplice. Father Dow would never attempt it.

But equally with the arrival of demonic humidity, even the summer time lectionary for Mass is a worry for preachers like me. The summer and fall readings from the Old Testament, the Epistles and the Gospels stop being about what Jesus has done for us as our God and Savior from Christmass to Easter and Pentecost; and the lessons start being about what Jesus wants us to do for him as men and women and children who belong to him. We stop discussing the mighty works for our salvation accomplished by the Incarnate Christ, and we start dwelling on how we might think and behave as those who now live in him and experience that salvation today. The preacher then has to stop being primarily a ritualist and become primarily a puritan. And you remember the definition of a puritan, don't you? "One who is very, very afraid that somebody, somewhere, is having a good time." And that usually means the preacher's done left off preachin' and gone to meddlin'. Today is a perfect example: Jesus quotes from the prophets—all of them, really, but directly from Hosea, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" Now I am by nature a ritualist rather than a puritan—I want you to have a good time, and I want you here at Mass watching me having a good time! But this summertime lectionary demands that I start meddlin' in the thoughts and actions of you sinners out there, and you sinners up here, and especially y'all in the choir.

Just like last Sunday: speaking of sinners, my brother was here for Mass, and at the door afterward thanked Father Dow for his sermon by slapping himself and saying "Thanks, I needed that." Do you remember what the Rector told us? Well, let me quote: "What does Jesus require of us? If, as Jesus says, not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, then it seems clear that lip-service Christianity is woefully insufficient. It is not enough to say, 'Lord, Lord;' we must also live as Christ calls us to live."

So ritual alone is not going to save me? Well, we already know that one. Father Dow is saying that even my acknowledgement alone that Jesus has done mighty works for my salvation is not enough to save me. And why is that? Because salvation begins not in the sweet, cool bye-and-bye, "like some spiritual 401-K," but in loving engagement with the world of lost sinners right now, today, this red-hot Charleston minute. Heaven begins here. And even puritan moralism alone is not enough to save me. Keeping up with every last one of the THOU-SHALT-NOTs still has almost nothing to do with the kind of religion Jesus preached. "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" does not mean "'I'm more concerned with how pure you are than about how beautiful you are in brocade vestments.'" My purity, my knowledge, my ceremonial perfection are none of them supremely valuable in God's eyes. "If I have all knowledge, if I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity I am nothing; I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. We all know the writer of these words—but it was Jesus who taught the idea to Saint Paul in the phrase "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Ceremonial, knowledge, even puritan morality does not outrank MERCY: and by "mercy" here we mean the Hebrew word *hesed*, the steadfast love Hosea bespeaks, the charity of St. Paul—love; love that moves us out of ourselves, love that makes us

do what Jesus set for us by example.

It's not merely that Jesus refused ceremonially to wash his hands before eating; it's not even that Jesus is morally pure; Jesus is lovingly eating with the wrong kind of people, the moral, social outcasts of the day, the sinners, the undeserving—just like he plans to do here today. Jesus' mightiest work for our salvation is to break bread with us in love; it makes salvation present now. Jesus teaches us by example: he loves, and he expects that I shall love as well. He calls us sinners to follow him, as he called the tax-collector and sinner Matthew. He calls me to move out of myself in loving response to what he has done for me. And my response, our response, to that call began at our baptism.

The beginning of my following Jesus was on the day that I died—the day I died to my old life by entering into his death, the day I was raised to new life, born again with him in his Resurrection. I joined Jesus in death willingly offering myself to him, letting go of the self-satisfied me, accepting his life of loving self-offering; and I received his life as my own, becoming alive in him now, today, this red-hot Charleston minute. This is by definition what we call “salvation” and “heaven:” to be alive in Christ now!

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice” could not possibly mean anything as silly or simplistic as that “ritual unconnected to repentance and conversion is futile.” Everybody knows that lesson. What it does mean is that no sacrifice is acceptable if it is not a sacrifice of me for the sake of love, an offering of myself in response to God's offering of himself—like the self-giving of Jesus, my life lovingly given so that I may find new life in God. That is salvation.

Living our Christian lives following after the merciful, charitable, steadfastly loving God and Savior Jesus Christ changes us, remakes us. “We become who God intends us to be, we become more and more who we were created to be,” and who we were reborn in the waters to be. Let us remember; let us repent; and let us join baby Joselyn and here renew our own baptismal covenant.