

I read this news story yesterday, while taking a break from packing to go to New Jersey:

*PATNA, India (Reuters) - A rich 80-year-old Indian widow has spent thousands of dollars on a feast for 100,000 people in the hope it would please the gods and open the doors of heaven for her, local officials said.*

*People from surrounding villages and towns were fed lunch over two consecutive days by Phuljharia Kunwar, who lives in the eastern state of Bihar and has no family or relatives. Kunwar spent \$37,500 on the feast. Local officials said she spent lavishly on the meal because she had no one to bequeath her property.*

*"She told us she could now begin her final journey and her soul could rest in peace in heaven," Ajay Kumar Bulganin, a local lawmaker who attended the feast, held over Wednesday and Thursday, said. "She was worried that no one would care about throwing a feast after her death."*

It's enough to make me grateful to know the God we have, to know the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ, and the live of the Spirit in our lives. We don't have to wonder about heaven, don't have to throw a feast or curry favor with the gods (g being lower case, of course). Jesus told us in today's scripture lesson: "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

I suspect that poor Indian woman offered her feast as a sacrifice to please man and gods alike, out of a fear that she could not do enough, could not be righteous enough, faithful enough, obedient enough, to please her gods. But what does it mean for us that God through Jesus wants from us mercy more than sacrifice?

We have 3 different stories within today's reading to help us find out.

First we have the calling of Matthew, named Levi in Luke and Mark. He was a tax collector. Since Jesus was on the road along the Galilee, Matthew was probably a customs agent, claiming a portion of each traveler's trade goods for the Roman Empire and also for himself. Tax collectors were not the most popular people: the rich despised them for cutting into their profits, the poor despised them for taking food from their children's mouths, and everyone knew that they took more than the Empire demanded to line their own pockets. For the Jews, a Jewish tax collector was a powerful betrayal: a servant of the Most High God, yoking himself to Rome and a ruler who claimed, falsely, to be a god himself.

There are some interesting things about this call story. First, Jesus sees Matthew at work—there was no denying what he was—and says simply, “follow me.” Although with other people Jesus would talk about repentance and giving up one's life, I think Jesus saw in Matthew something different from what everyone

else saw. Where the disciples, even, might have seen a hated tax collector, a thief, Jesus appears to see in Matthew a desire for change, for new life. And Matthew answers Jesus' call by getting up and following him. Matthew hosted Jesus, the disciples, and Matthew's own friends to a meal, upsetting the Pharisees.

Now, the Pharisees were rightly concerned with strict obedience to the law; this was their calling, and the way they knew to be certain that they would please God and be blameless before him. Like the Indian woman, they hoped to earn a place in God's favor by doing all the right things, even avoiding contact with those who were unclean, or tainted by their sin or association with Gentiles. And so when they asked Jesus' disciples *why* he would be eating with heathens, they were asking a legitimate question. They knew, as we do, that the company we keep often determines our behavior, and so they felt that Jesus' companions at the dinner table might be putting him at risk.

Jesus' response is telling: those who are well do not need a physician; the one who is sick does...I came to call not the righteous but sinners. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus is telling us something important about the people whom God reaches out to: those who are in need, those who know their need, those who are alienated from God and one another. The Pharisees were convinced that following the law would make them righteous before God. They knew that they

were doing all the right things. They were faithful in worship and attended carefully to the teachings of the rabbis—and they thought they had the path to God’s favor all figured out. But, Jesus says, there was something that they were missing.

While Jesus was talking to the disciples and the Pharisees, a synagogue leader came in, desperate to see Jesus. The other gospels tell us that this man’s name was Jairus, and he understood about needing Jesus: his daughter had just died. He begged Jesus to come and lay his hand on her, so that she might live. Jairus was also one who was faithful to the law and to the prophets, one who had believed that following all the rules would earn him God’s pleasure—but in this moment, Jairus needed something more: he needed God’s mercy, God’s healing, God’s power, and he saw that Jesus, God’s Son, could give him what he needed. And so Jesus got up, and followed him.

On the way they met a woman who had been ill for 12 years with hemorrhages. For the Jews, any contact with blood was unclean, and so this woman had not only been sick for 12 years, she had been separated from her family, from her friends, from the temple, from God as far as she knew. She was desperate enough to break the rules, to approach Jesus, to literally sneak up on him just to touch the hem of his cloak for healing. And she was rewarded for her

faith by being reunited with “polite company,” able to rejoin her family again, to work and to worship and to have friends again.

Finally Jesus got to Jairus’ home, and saw the mourners already there, singing songs of lament and making a commotion. The girl was dead, and the funeral preparations had begun, when Jesus walked up and said, “Go away. The girl is not dead, she’s sleeping.” They laughed at him, but eventually they were all cleared out of the house, and Jesus went in, took the girl by the hand, and she got up. Again, a taboo is broken: this time the restriction against contact with the dead, which would also have rendered one ritually unclean, and therefore would have been something those who were counting on strict obedience to the law would not have done. And so, as with all of the words and works of Jesus Christ handed down to us, the reports of these happenings spread, leaving us with these miracle stories, and Jesus’ charge: Go, and learn what this means.

What does it mean for us that God in Jesus Christ chose not to fulfill all righteousness by avoiding tax collectors and sinners, bleeding women and dying little girls? What does it mean for us that new life is offered not to those who are most deserving but to those who are most in need? What can we learn from these acts of Jesus, who Matthew says fulfilled the law and the prophets as the Messiah, when they seem so counter to the culture and teachings of the time?

It is easy enough for us to say that Jesus came so that sinners might be reconciled to God. Matthew certainly qualified. Collecting taxes for Rome was not like working for the IRS; tax collectors paid for the privilege of collecting a set amount of taxes. Anything else they were able to collect was theirs. And there was no way to look in a simple registry and find out how much a person owed: they had to pay what the tax collector said. Being a tax collector meant being a turncoat, a traitor to one's own people, a leech who lived off the work of others. It may have been a lucrative profession, but certainly not one in which Matthew would have made a lot of friends. In accepting Matthew, Jesus was making a powerful statement about the kind of people God is willing to accept: not just the Pharisee, not just the righteous, but anyone who will answer the call, "Follow me."

And it is a simple enough thing for us to say that Jesus heals the sick—now, in our time and culture where we do not have such fear of illness. But in the time of Jesus and Matthew, blood and death were greatly to be feared. Not only was there a fear that blood and death were catching (and so often, they were) but also there was the sense that there was power in blood and death. When properly practiced, in the temple, by a priest, the death and blood of an animal as a sacrifice to God could bring great favor. But anywhere else, the mere touch of

blood or any contact with a dead person could render one ritually unclean, unfit in God's eyes, until a cleansing ritual was practiced. To touch someone who was bleeding, to touch the dead, was an act of profound generosity and mercy that signaled, along with Jesus' welcoming of Matthew, that God's love and favor is for those people traditionally considered outsiders—for those who needed God's love.

Now the truth of the matter is that the Pharisees needed love and mercy as much as anyone else. They simply didn't know it. They had taken the path of rigorous adherence to the law just as far as they could take it, and a bit farther than was wise. Jesus would call them "blind guides," knowing that they could not see their need, could not see any farther than the carefully concocted shell of rules and self-protective behaviors they had made—that in their zeal for righteousness and closeness to the will of God, they had closed themselves off from a relationship with God, from an awareness of mercy and love that has the power to transform lives. But there is hope, even in this story, for the Pharisees: the story of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, who in his need was able to see clearly that the love and mercy of God, in the presence of Jesus Christ, could heal his daughter and change his life.

And the truth of the matter is that we, as Christians, as church-goers, as people who try to live as Jesus would have us, can sometimes have the same blindness, the same boundaries that would fence us off from others. We can look more like Pharisees than like someone who truly needs God. And let's face it, isn't that how we think of ourselves? We're the clean ones, dressed for worship in our finery, the ones who try to do the right thing, to be the right kind of people. We're the ones who are here, in this sanctuary, doing what we know how to do to get closer to God, to have God's favor, to know God's love. We're the ones in danger of *not* knowing it as well as we could, of forgetting our need, of getting so familiar with the love of God that the power of the Spirit in our lives becomes more of a memory than a presence in our lives.

"Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy more than sacrifice," is a challenge to all of us, all people, who wonder about God and what our relationship with God might be. It calls us to see the Incarnation lived out in the church: to learn from one another, pray for one another, support one another. But then we are also challenged to reach out beyond the walls of the buildings, beyond the boundaries of our fellowship with one another, to extend the love and mercy we've come to know to those who are not here. And those to whom

we are called to offer love and mercy are just as foreign to us, just as taboo, as the tax collector, the bleeding woman, the dead child were to Jesus Christ.

In our culture and time, that means accepting the foreigner, from folks “from off” to folks from Mexico, Africa, Asia. It means welcoming into our church those who are not like us, from people with developmental disabilities to people who don’t hear well, to those who are sick or who don’t have the nice homes and clothing we have. It means welcoming the sick, just as in Jesus’ day; just as then it means offering mercy and love to people with diseases we’re afraid of, like HIV.

It means that we, as the people called by the name Christian, are to be living testaments to the love and grace of God we’ve seen in our own lives, we’ve witnessed in others’ lives. And we are to share it with others. Jesus, when he came, set the world on its ear because he taught that conventional wisdom was inadequate, insufficient, just plain not enough. It’s not enough to surround ourselves with people we’re comfortable with, who are just like us, because they know how to worship God the way we do. It’s not enough to offer worship to God and not invite God’s mercy into every part of our lives, because Jesus said clearly, “It is mercy I want, more than sacrifice.”

And when we live in the mercy of God, when our own blinders are stripped off and we realize that even we still need God’s mercy (maybe we even especially

need it), when we realize that we are less righteous than we are needy, then we can meet Christ—then we can follow with Matthew, be healed like that woman and child, and then we can have confidence that poor woman in India didn't have: the Kingdom of Heaven is not lived out here and now with feasts and grand parties and trying to make friends with lavish gifts. The Kingdom of Heaven is not lived out even in having the most beautiful sanctuary, the best music, or even wonderful preaching (if we say so ourselves).

The kingdom of Heaven comes near when we greet a stranger as a friend. It comes near when we acknowledge that we, no less than anyone else, need mercy and grace and forgiveness from God, and it comes near when we offer mercy and grace and forgiveness to others. The Kingdom of heaven comes near when we worship with all our hearts and open our hearts not only to Christ's Spirit within us, but when we open our eyes to see that same Spirit in unexpected places. Heaven comes near when we, like Jesus, welcome others into God's mercy, and find ourselves welcomed again, in return.

Thanks be to God. Amen.