

“What does God desire of you?”

Matthew 9:9-13

(additional texts: Hos 5.15-6.6; Ps 50; Romans 4.13-18)

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist

Dixon's Corners Christian Reformed Church (Ontario)

Pentecost 3, Year A

June 9, 2002

*Scripture reading: Matthew 9.9-13*

*Going on from that place, Jesus saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at his toll station. Jesus said to him: "Follow me." Matthew arose and followed him. Now it happened that Jesus was reclining at a meal in the house and many toll-collectors and sinners were coming in and reclining with Jesus. When the Pharisees saw (this), they said to Jesus' students: "Why does your teacher eat with toll-collectors and sinners?" But Jesus heard them (and he answered them himself): "Those who are hale and hearty have no need of a doctor, but those who are ill do (have need of a doctor). Get out of here and go learn what (the Scripture) means "I desire mercy and not sacrifice", because I have come not to call the righteous but to call sinners."*

-----

Do you know what I spend my time doing as a professor or teacher? There are 4 major expenses of my time:

- preparing classes,
- teaching those classes,
- marking papers AND
- helping those who are having difficulties.

With regard to helping those with difficulties, I want you to know that, of course, I help the excellent students, too. I certainly don't ignore them. But there is no problem letting them go on to do their own work, which they usually do very well. The struggling ones? Well, with them I have to spend a lot time.

You might say: well, if you did a better job of teaching, you wouldn't have those who are struggling. Ideally, that's true, but realistically, that's not true. There are some who just struggle. But, if that's true, you might ask, why do you bother with them? Why not concentrate your energies on those who are succeeding and help them to go on to excellence and just accept the fact that there are some who won't succeed? Well, I can't. As a teacher, my goal is to help all the students succeed. I know that, in reality, not all will, but my goal is not to decide ahead of time who will and who won't but to help ALL succeed if possible.

Or take the case of my doctor. I have an excellent doctor. He says to me " if you have a problem, come and see me; I'm always here for you. If you don't have a problem, don't bother me." He is what I call a VERY "low maintenance" doctor! I say to him: "but shouldn't I come and have a check-up once in awhile?" He

says: "look, are you eating well?" yes, "sleeping well?" yes, "any pains?", no, "not smoking or drinking excessively?" right, "still exercising? riding your bike? swimming? weights?" yes, "then don't bother me".

It's not that he doesn't care about me, my health and my well-being. Because, if I do go to him with something crucial or urgent, he blazes a path for me to the specialist or the hospital and spends as much time as necessary with me to heal the problem. But, he knows that I'm normally healthy and don't need his services right now, unlike a lot of people in his waiting room who are pressing to see him. He wants them to be restored to the kind of health that both he and I normally enjoy and he believes that he has the skill and knowledge by which that might just happen.

Or how about parents: parents, do you care about your children? Of course you do, if you're good parents. You spend time earning money to support your family or you spend time around your house making it a home for your family to thrive in. You spend time with your kids: playing with them, reading to them, teaching them about life and how things work, going over their school work with them -- and realizing how little you know and how much they know. At some time in your life as a parent, you may end up having to spend more time with one of your children who is struggling, perhaps with school work, perhaps with a disease, perhaps struggling with peer pressure and bullying at school, perhaps getting to the root of why they are so depressed (something that often has to do with their appearance -- the number one problem plaguing most teenagers), struggling with learning how to manage their money.

Why do you do it? Because you desire for that child, as for all of your children, fullness of life and the eventual ability to live a happy, healthy, and whole life independent of you and your spouse. You do not ignore your children that are succeeding and going on to great things with apparent ease: you encourage them, you support them, you attend all of their functions and they know how much you love them. But, they are not at risk; they will succeed; their future is not in doubt, whereas your other child's future may be. So, that's where a lot of your energy will go.

---

In our Gospel reading today we learn about what God desires for us and how he will ensure that we get there. We learn in the form of this story about Jesus the essence of what the catechism teaches us about what God desires for us: God wants us to be healthy and whole in every way, and He wants us to recognize why we are that way, which is because of God. God wants his creation to be and to do what he has always intended for it to do: to be fruitful and to multiply and to honour God for it.

What does that mean? It means that God wants all of creation to reflect the fullness of life, in body, mind and spirit. Not only does God not desire the death of any sinner, God desires that all creation would be full of life, full of truth, and full of excitement and desire for life and truth, truth that is known most perfectly through God's own revelation of Himself to humans in creation.

God also knows that there are some within creation who see this and honour Him for it. They are people who are characterized by a kind of natural wholeness and health, whether they know it comes from God or not. Whether they know it or not, they are servants of God, working in the vineyard of the Lord since early in the morning, doing just what God wants them to do. They are elder brothers who have been out in the field all day working on their father's behalf, bringing forth the fruits of the field, just as their father wants them to do. They are busy, active and thankful.

The Pharisees were very much like this, and furthermore, they knew God. They knew exactly what God desired of them: holiness of life, following the commandments of the law, honouring father and mother, honouring the sabbath, taking the Lord's name seriously and never vainly, and knowing that all things come of God. It would be hard to imagine people with whom God would have less quarrel than with the Pharisees.

God also knows that there are some in His creation who are at risk, who are struggling, who can't get to the field to work, those who are anything but whole and healthy. In Jesus' day, there were many who were sick in body -- lepers, lame, blind, all sorts of diseases and illnesses. In Jesus' day there were also some, like the toll collectors here -- Jews who were Roman sympathizers who agreed to betray their own people so as to survive financially in a cut-throat world -- or like the prostitutes whom Jesus encountered -- women who probably had been abandoned by their husbands or whose husbands had died or disappeared in an accident or in war, women who sold themselves to men to survive and who were then thrown away when they got too old. Jesus does not condemn them, leave them to fall by the side of the road; he knows, like a teacher, like a doctor, like a parent, that they are redeemable but that it's going to take a LOT more time and energy to bring them to fullness of life, to the full measure of what God desires for them, than it will take others. And because God desires this for them, He will do everything in His power to bring them to wholeness.

And that "everything" will be his death. Because, unlike a doctor who diagnoses and prescribes medicines or medical intervention, or unlike a teacher who does his or her best to impart and stimulate knowledge, or even unlike a parent who goes the final length to help his or her child, God knows that for those who are in need, who are struggling, who are at risk because they are fundamentally sick, fundamentally challenged, and unable to do anything for themselves to save themselves, a medicine will be required that is different from all other medicines. God knows that in these cases, it is going to take his son, Jesus, who will go to the sick, to the at risk, and who will heal them because that's what God desires for them, but not by external prescription, or by imparting knowledge, or even by standing with them as closely as a parent stands to a child that they will be restored: God knows that it will only be by his son's death that their sickness will die, and by his son's life, that these sick humans will rise to new life. God knows that the only way to bring these people to fullness of life is to give them a whole new life, that they will have to die to their old one and take on a new identity. And God will make that possible in Jesus: they will die with Jesus in their old life, and they will rise with Jesus to new life.

And Jesus is willing to do this for them, because as the perfect expression of God's love in the world, Jesus says this is what God wants for all of humanity: life in all its fullness. Here, it's a gift to you.

Sounds great, doesn't it? It is great, the greatest gift that the world has ever known.

But, believe it or not, some of the healthy will hear this and they will say: "harrumph! What did these people do to deserve this gift? We have been striving all day in the field; we have been faithful all of our lives, and what have we ever gotten out of it? We've never been given such a gift that says: live your life the way you want it, and then when you've made a mess of it, God will give you a new one!"

Well, to the healthy who feel this way, God surely asks: what would you desire for those who are sick? That they remain sick, just so that you can be assured that you've always been on the right path, and they haven't? Do you not want for the sick, for the needy, for the at risk what God wants for them? God is not condemning you for knowing him, for loving him, for honouring him, almost naturally; but don't condemn

God for showing mercy upon those who are just like you, who share the same blood as you, who can be brought back to wholeness and fullness of life, but at a tremendous cost.

---

What about you gathered here. What does God desire of you? Surely it is the same thing that he desires of all people everywhere: that you be fruitful and multiply, that your life be lived in all possible fullness. This may take many forms: it may mean that you will have many children; it may mean that God will prosper the works of your hands in the production of your fields and factories; it may mean that God will increase and multiply your knowledge or your production of beauty in the form of art; it may mean that you will enjoy length of days and fullness of hope.

For some, this will come naturally, with care, devotion, and hard work, but they will thank God naturally, even if they don't know God's exact name.

But, for some it will not come naturally or easily at all. For some who struggle, who can't make it, who are sick in body, mind or spirit, those who have become irredeemably alienated from the community because of their life-style or something that they have done, those who have made bad political choices, those who are irreparably separated from other family members by something that was said or done years ago in anger, God can break through and restore their lives and bring them back to himself. They can see that it is God's love, expressed to them in the self-sacrifice of Jesus, God's own son, that not only shows to them how much God loves them but also how effective God's healing is. When that happens, Jesus tells us, there will be more rejoicing in heaven than over one good day's worth of labour.

Yes, it can happen if you let it happen. Or, will you be like those who naturally love God, or even those who have been restored by God to fullness of life, but who then resent it when someone you see as "undeserving" is given a second-chance? Surely, you can see from our Gospel reading that that is NOT what God wants.

---

Finally, friends, I think that what God desires of you who know what I have been speaking about this morning, not only your own lives to be full and joyful. God also desires of you to proclaim to those who are struggling that indeed God extends to them His mercy, what today we might call "a second chance". I think that what God desires of you is not only that you let God give others a second-chance, but that you be the means whereby it happens.

That's ultimately what God wanted of Israel: God did not want Israel to sit on the knowledge of God and let the rest of the world go to hell; God wanted Israel to become the means whereby the grace and mercy of God would be proclaimed to the whole world. But, Israel sat on the truth, claimed it as its own, and said: we are righteous and everyone else is damned.

Has the Church ever done this? You know, church and ritual are good things, but if it hadn't been for the early church proclaiming forth a message that everyone had a second chance, if they had kept this to themselves, the church would still today be a little group of men and women in Palestine.

God desires for you fullness of life, but God also desires of you that you "go and do likewise", that you go forth and give others a second chance, people you may be keeping in bondage by not letting them free from something that they have done against you or people who simply do not know the love of God. This may happen right here in your community, among the people that you know. Or, it may happen in the wider Canadian community, Or it might happen abroad.

There are many people who call Africa a "basket case". George W. Bush argued in his electoral campaign against Al Gore that the US should concentrate its energies on places where it could get something for the investment of time and energy: North America, Europe, Russia, China. But, he said, the US should forget about Africa: it was a helpless situation and we would get nothing for our investment there.

There are many in the developed world who feel the same way that Bush does. But, God despises nothing that he has made, and God desires for the people of Africa the same thing that he desires for the people of Dixon's Corners: fullness of life.

But, someone needs to tell those who have not heard this. For some, they just need to be able to "name" what all their life they have known; but in Africa, there are many who also need a lot of time invested in restoring them to life. Thanks be to God that there have been and still are those who through the ages have known that and, when they, healthy and full of life, asked themselves if God desired of them something beyond the fullness of life that they had received from God heard the words "go and do likewise", and they did. For some years in Africa, these were missionaries who came from elsewhere; now there are Africans who are proclaiming the word to other Africans.

This last week, in the Anglican communion, we remembered the Ugandan martyrs of 1886. In the late 1870s Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries began to preach the gospel to the members of the court of the Ugandan king, King Mutesa. But, Mutesa's successor, King Mwanga, became angry when he realized that those who had begun to accept Christ were putting loyalty to Christ above the traditional loyalty to the king, and he began to kill the most outspoken Christians in the court. But, it didn't stop the conversions, so he vowed to stamp out Christianity completely. On 3 June 1886 (116 years ago last Monday), thirty-two young men, pages of the court of King Mwanga of Buganda, were burned to death at Namugongo for their refusal to renounce Christianity. In the following months many other Christians throughout the country died by spear or fire for their faith.

But, rather than stamp out Christianity, Ugandans, seeing the example of these martyrs, began to turn to Christ all over the country. Uganda now has the largest percentage of professed Christians of any nation in Africa.

In fact, is it surprising to you, my friends, that while it is true that Europe is still the continent which, after more than 1500 years of Christianity has the largest single bloc of Christians in the world (560 million), mission fields like Africa, Latin America, and Asia have over 1 billion Christians, and within another generation will have closer to 1 and half billion Christians. Measured in richness of life in Christ, Africa today is experiencing in a remarkable way the fullness of life that God promises. Sure, there is a long way to go for fullness of life in every area, but surely this is the right foundation on which to build toward a solid future of life in all its fullness.

It ought to be no surprise, because where God's love shows forth in mercy and in power there the Word of the Lord will be fruitful and will multiply. The Church is the place where we come to hear that word and

to offer our weekly thanks to God, but the walls of the church cannot contain what God will bring to growth here if we let him. No, the walls of this church will simply explode forth, sending you and me into the world, to call sinners, to show forth the mercy and healing power of God, to bring to all what God desires for all: life in all its abundance, as shown to us in Jesus, our Lord. So, go, minister to the sick, to the needy, to those who need health, and do so in the power of God.

*PRAYER:*

*O God from whom all good proceeds*

*you desire for your creation fruitfulness, fullness, multiplication of blessing*

*When we turned away from you in sin, you did not cease to care for us*

*in your mercy you came to us. You spoke to the patriarchs, to prophets, to seers.*

*Then, you came to us in your own son, Jesus, who invested his life in us, to heal us and to restore us*

*Grant that by your inspiration we may always honour and thank you as the one who gives life and wholeness to the world,*

*and send us forth into the world so that we may extend the word of your forgiving grace and mercy to those who need your life-giving touch.*