

From The Pastor

Perhaps like me, you have wondered why Matthew so quickly followed Jesus upon being called. It is almost as if he is waiting on the edge of his seat like an anxious job applicant waiting for an interview.

Is it possible to be waiting in such a way and at the same time not know what you are waiting for? With Matthew, and with ourselves I would suggest this is exactly what is happening. In my mind, this story is very similar to the story of Zacchaeus who immediately followed Jesus upon being called. What are they waiting for and why do they immediately follow?

A quick look at Matthew's life reveals a great deal. He is a Jewish man, living among his Jewish friends. For whatever reason, he finds himself in the role of tax collector. This means he is thought to have betrayed himself and his neighbors to collect taxes on behalf of the Romans. While collecting taxes he undoubtedly engaged in the common practice of inflating the amount collected for his own benefit. He is hated by his neighbors as a traitor and a thief.

This is not a pleasant picture. Matthew is not a happy soul. He may be well to do, but he is not at home in his own skin and he doesn't like it. His soul is sick and he does not know the way out. Enter Jesus, who calls Matthew. Without knowing it, this is what Matthew is waiting for. Jesus is the soul doctor who can heal what is ailing the man who is rejected by himself and others. Without hesitation Matthew follows, and finds new life.

Healing begins around a meal at Matthew's house. Interestingly, while at table many others who know the same sting of rejection join in the occasion. Those in the sickness of sin and the pain of rejection do not want to miss an opportunity to hear a word of healing acceptance.

Those who have absolved themselves from sin and its sting want to know why Jesus is so friendly with unworthy sinners. 'Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners? Their sickness is of a different sort and the remedy is different. Jesus overhears the comment and replies: "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'."

The Pharisees who have put themselves above sin do so by the ritual completion of sacrifice. In this case, the sacrifice is used as a scapegoat for personal honesty and admission of their own human incompleteness. Their sacrifice becomes self-justifying and blinds them to their own sickness of soul. Mercy is the true sacrifice they have yet to accept or offer.

Mercy is beyond one's control. It is pure gift. This is why Matthew and his companions are so quick to follow Jesus. The weight of sin and rejection lays heavy on their souls. They could admit their sin because it was before them always; not only from their neighbors, but also from within themselves. The offer of mercy is the key that unlocks this prison. Whatever they might have to give up by this exchange, they are more than ready to hear a word of acceptance and forgiveness.

Knowing they are sinners, they recognize mercy for what it is. Those who admit guilt can only wait for mercy to find a true freedom. When it comes, it is gratefully embraced. The Pharisees could not understand mercy because they could not admit or accept that they were sinners. Their remedy was to go and learn the meaning of mercy, and the only way to truly learn mercy is to deeply realize that one is in need of it. Mercy is a virtue of necessity. It is not an optional choice for the sake of spiritual enrichment. To know mercy in its truth is to first know that one is guilty beyond self-absolution.

The acceptance Jesus shows Matthew and the others becomes the open door through which they can find healing. They know what their sins are, and they know they want to be free of them. The acceptance Jesus shows them is, in effect, his mercy. Jesus does not allow their sin to stop him from engaging them in welcome. This welcome opens the door for them to begin to make new choices about their lives and behavior. To have received mercy and the freedom it offers, is to show mercy on behalf of others. Once the Pharisee, in any of us, learns the meaning of mercy from the inside out, then mercy will be given to others. To accept mercy and not offer it to others is to not really understand what mercy truly is.

By way of announcement, I want to let you know that Nancy Mason-Bordley has accepted a new position with the Dominican Center for Religious Development. As such, Nancy will be leaving as our Director of Religious Formation. Because of the nature of retreat work and weekend commitments, Nancy is also leaving her position as leader of the Folk Ensemble. I offer hearty congratulations to Nancy for her advancement in a field she loves, and I believe one in which she will thrive. We are very sorry to see her leave. Though DRE only two years, Nancy has been a part of SVF music for over thirty years. Please join us on Sunday, June 29 after the 10:30 Mass for an appreciation reception and farewell. I acknowledge as well the entire Religious Education staff, and the entire Folk Ensemble. Please join us!

Father John Esper