

God Desires Mercy

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Hosea 5:15-6:6

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Do you remember the Pushmi-Pullyu from Doctor Dolittle? The fictional animal (I repeat, fictional) had a body like an antelope or a llama, with a head at both ends and with two pairs of legs and feet that pointed in the same direction as the head and neck above them. According to author Hugh Lofting, the two heads allowed one to eat and the other to carry on a conversation without being rude.

Nevertheless, I can imagine that the two heads didn't always agree, and I can imagine that that would have been remarkably awkward.

Religion and spirituality have a pushme-pullyou dimension – all religions, as far as I can tell. On the one side, we've got the impulse toward a direct relationship with God. People do a lot of things to build that and maintain it. We pray by ourselves. We worship with others. We place art with religious themes around us. We perform certain rituals that we believe God has asked us to do, which includes our practice of Holy Communion, by the way. We dedicate ourselves to furthering that primary relationship.

The other dimension is to do things that we believe God has asked us to do in relation to other human beings. It's been widely claimed, with pretty good justification, that the "golden rule" of treating people as you'd like to be treated is part of every religious tradition. That's hard to prove, but check out the Wikipedia article on the Golden Rule sometime. Researchers have found it in a lot of faiths and cultures.

When asked about the Greatest Commandment, Jesus first quoted Deuteronomy 6, which says "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might." Jesus then followed up with a reference to Leviticus 19: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

There's the pushme-pullyou again – Jesus didn't say doing both at once was easy. But he did seem to think there were priorities.

Jesus appeared to have an odd reputation among his fellow rabbis. They paid attention to him. They respected him enough to invite him as a special guest when he visited their villages. He also puzzled them, sometimes quite a lot. Why would a respectable religious leader and teacher summon a tax collector to follow him? I suppose it's nice that the man abandoned the disgraceful, collaborationist work, but make him an associate? I mean, eat with him?

Quite aside from ritual uncleanness, that's gross.

How many people have never been invited to your table because something they've done or said or represented is, to you, gross?

For myself, I don't know. I've lost count.

It made a huge difference for Matthew. As Amy Frykolm writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "He is sitting, literally, at the table of his unhealthy and degraded identity as tax collector. Toward him walks the 'source of life's fullness.' The English writer, Jeannette Winterson, says that many great stories begin this way. Once upon a time, there was a person in circumstances that weren't all that they hoped for. And then there was an encounter. In a moment, the bare facts of what is changed to what if, the expansion of possibility."

It made all the difference in the world.

Jesus' rabbinic colleagues were right to be leery. Let's get that straight. They were following guidance from Law and Prophets that emphasized personal piety and practice to maintain faithfulness to God. They were praying, fasting, worshiping, and resting on the Sabbath. They were doing, frankly, things that we should be doing.

But that's just one side of the pushme-pullyou.

Remember the other side? Love your neighbor as yourself.

Centuries before, the people of Israel, the northern of the two nations which had split after the death of David's son Solomon, heard an earnest and, let's face it, rather troubled prophet named Hosea try to remind them that their national practice of worship and ritual was not enough to maintain the covenant with God. Whatever they did during the week to treat others badly, they firmly believed that their piety won them forgiveness. "Let us press on to know the LORD;" Hosea quotes them as saying, "his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth."

But what about the other side of the pushme-pullyou?

"I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice," Hosea wrote, quoting God this time, "the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

Centuries later, Jesus quoted Hosea quoting God to those who asked about hanging out with all these sinners. "Go and learn what this means," he said: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

If you've been listening really carefully, you may have noticed that those quotes don't match. "I desire steadfast love," it says in Hosea; "I desire mercy," it says in Matthew. The reason is that the Hebrew word Hosea used, "hesed," doesn't have a one-to-one translation in English or in

first century Greek. It means steadfast love, and it means mercy, and it means loyalty, and it means grace.

Commit to steadfast love, mercy, loyalty, and grace to those around you, said Jesus. That's more important than prayer and fasting and worship and resting at the right time.

God desires mercy from us for them.

It's also true that God desires mercy from them to us. Personally, I don't have as much control over the way other people treat me as I'd like. Like you, I'm relying on that foundational teaching of the Golden Rule in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, Yoruba, and a host of faiths whose names I've never heard to guide their adherents into care, compassion, and mercy for their fellow travelers on the road of life.

Look hard enough at any religion, look hard enough at Christianity, and you'll find justification to treat other people badly. In Christianity it isn't that hard, to tell you the truth (I suspect that's true in plenty of other faiths as well).

Before you pull out that excuse, however, remember Hosea and Jesus and a lot of other Biblical writers, all of whom insisted that God desires mercy from us and for us.

Mercy. It's more powerful than all the pious actions we might do.

Mercy.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson