### “Mercy Not Sacrifice” Steve Finlan for The First Church, June 11, 2023

**Romans 4:13–22**

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. . .

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us) 17. . . in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” 19He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead . . . 20No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

**Matthew 9:10–13**

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?” 12But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Welcome to First Church. It is always a joy to gather as a faith community, to share our stories, and learn more about our heavenly Father. If there is a theme that emerges in the Bible, it is that we all have one Father, who loves all of us, and nurtures our spirits. Our Father wants us to grow in faith, to learn more about his love, and share that love with one another.

It may be somewhat difficult to see how today’s two Scriptures are connected. They make very different points, and the gospel passage itself makes two or three distinct points. But I think we can find a particular truth that ties them together.

Let’s start with Paul’s reasoning in the Letter to the Romans. Central to his argument is that faith, and not strict obedience to the law, is what leads to salvation. It was Abraham *believing* the promise that he and Sarah would one day have a son that caused Abraham to be reckoned as righteous. Although he was elderly, he did not doubt God’s promise, and God was able to build upon his trusting. Abraham’s faith is the foundation of the whole history of salvation. This one person made great change possible.

When it comes to our receiving of Jesus, it is still faith that is the determining factor. The Promise came to us through faith, and we gain the inheritance, that is, salvation, through our faith. My wife says that even though faith is a noun it should really be considered an action verb. For it is only when we *activate* our faith and *participate* with God, that amazing things begin. Each of us has his or her own unique faith journey to discover.

Now let us look at the gospel passage, where we find the Pharisees looking down their noses at Jesus and the ordinary people with whom he is socializing. Jesus’ response is “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matt 9:12). In other words, those who *think* they are fine will not seek out his spiritual help, but those who *know* they need help are those who seek out a physician. Jesus is saying that he can help those who know they have a spiritual need.

In fact, *everybody* needs spiritual help, but not everybody will admit it. Those who think they are well, who think they are just fine, don’t seek out Jesus’ help. But the people who have sought out Jesus have given thought to their spiritual condition; they know they are sinners or are spiritually ill, so they seek out the spiritual physician, Jesus.

Jesus continues his teaching, saying “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (9:13). Here he is quoting Hosea 6:6. It means God desires true spiritual qualities, not an outward demonstration of religious ritual. We see that in Psalm 50, also, where sacrifice is mocked. God says “Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?” (50:13). Rather, the psalmist says, come to God with thanksgiving and call on him in your day of need (50:14–15).

*If* someone is sensitive to true spiritual values, he will recognize his spiritual neediness. So the final line in our gospel reading, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (9:13), again refers to *awareness* of spiritual need. He means his call will be recognized by those who know they are sinners, but not by those who think they are perfectly righteous. Jesus fulfills and satisfies the spiritual needs of his followers, and his sheep know his voice.

Jesus is actually using two different metaphors in these sayings, and I think they serve well to describe the different kinds of spiritual neediness that people have. Those who need a physician are those who know they are ailing or sick. They need healing and repair. Maybe that’s half the human race. I am one of those. I know I need spiritual healing.

The other type of person, maybe the other half of the human race, are those who are sinful, and he comes for those as well. They need repentance, repair, and forgiveness. Many people *know* they are sinful, and need help with *that* problem. Are you sick, or are you bad? Either way, Jesus has the therapy for you.

One of the connections between our biblical passages is the river of faith that flows through time, and runs through both passages. Abraham had strong, even stubborn, faith, and it became the pattern for all future believers. The ones who seek out Jesus are stubbornly certain that they need his help. The promise of salvation is given to those who have faith. And this promise is still on offer today.

Take a moment to reflect upon your understanding of your spiritual needs. Are you satisfied with your current level of love and understanding of God’s plan for you? Is there something you would like to do better, in your interactions with others? Do you give yourself the gift of communion with Jesus and the Father? In the days ahead, set aside the daily chores and cares to quiet your mind. Let God’s words through Jesus come to you in those quiet moments. You do not have to wait until you are “better” in one way or another, to be able to receive God’s love. God loves you as you are right now, and is willing to start the conversation. Have the faith of Abraham and be a seeker of God’s love. Seek and you shall find.