

Jesus' manner of mercy (Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26)

At Matthew's house, we learn about more than just Jesus' message.

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Our reading from Matthew poses multiple missional questions. Jesus goes to the house of Matthew modeling a way of being in the world. He illuminates the true intention of the law the Pharisees seek to uphold. It is in this modeling—Jesus at the house of Matthew, along with others present who are perceived as outsiders—that we learn not only about the message of Jesus but about his manner or method as well.

Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, is a teacher in the line of Moses. In good rabbinic fashion, he begins to engage the dynamic discourse around mercy and sacrifice. He quotes Hosea's oracle: God "desires mercy, not sacrifice" (6:6).

In Matthew, the pervasive use of Old Testament prophetic texts illuminates the Jewishness of Jesus and the connection between his life and Israel's vocation. But Jesus begins to model a missional manner that differentiates him from the particular Pharisees he is engaging.

Amid imperial occupation, the Pharisees tried not to assimilate. They observed Torah diligence and strict adherence to the law as a way to preserve the life of their community. Matthew's Gospel presents a hyperbolic picture of Jesus' relationship

with the Pharisees. When he exegetes this passage in Hosea—mercy over sacrifice—he exemplifies his role as rabbi but also places himself in perceived opposition to the law.

Some Pharisees ask the disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” This is just one of many oppositional episodes in Jesus’ interactions with Pharisees in Matthew. In a Gospel that emphasizes Jesus’ Jewishness, what is this oppositional relationship about?

I think it’s about Jesus’ emphasis on being sent into the world—on being set apart not for what Bonhoeffer calls “religious refuge” but to embrace the particular for the sake of the universal.

Matthew’s Gospel is clear: Jesus knows the law and holds it sacred. He’s also eager to get to its heart: the particular for the sake of the universal. The law of mercy shaping one’s relational dynamic with neighbors, aliens, and those on the margins of community. The law at its heart as a way of being in relationship with both God and the world.

How do we, as disciples, pay attention to Jesus’ manner along with his message? How do we move toward an embodied way of being that extends mercy to the world?