

Seek a Tender Heart

Fr. Thomas Ryden

June 11, 2023

Scriptures: Hosea 5:15-6:6; Psalm 50; Matthew 9:9-13

Translation can be a funny thing. This was something I knew before, but was hammered home all the more when I was in Chol Chol, Chile this March with the team from Apostles and Old North Abbey. A Spanish journeyman at best, I was placed by myself in a completely Spanish-speaking home. And thanks to my generous and patient hosts, we were able to communicate with one another, albeit imperfectly. If you have been in an environment in which you have been immersed in a language that is not native for you, you will know that the mental work of that alone was the most strenuous and exhausting part of my trip, even while it was a true gift for my continued learning.

I of course made many errors along the way, getting a verb tense wrong here and adding the wrong end to an adjective there, but I really messed things up twice. And it wasn't grammar that caused these problems. In both cases, I was using the word I intended to use in the right form. The problem was that the connotation of the word was much different for my hosts than it was for me.

The first was a word I used to describe myself and people like me, “Americano.” My hosts were curious about what life was like in my home country, and when I was describing what things were like here in the US, I referred to the people here as “Americanos.” I knew I had messed up immediately, not only from the looks on the faces of my hosts, but also because I have a sister who has lived for the last decade in Central America. And you can probably see the problem. Here I was telling a table full of *South Americans* what Americans were like. This time, I was able to right the ship, correcting myself that we of course were all Americans, and that I was referring to people from the United States, or *estadunidenses*.

But for my other blunder, I needed some help. I was answering some questions about relationships between the generations in the US, and for that conversation, I was using the word *joven* to describe younger generations and *viejo* to describe the elder generations. And every time I said the word *viejo*, I could see the eyes dart around the table, especially to the grandmother sitting with us. After this process repeated itself a couple of times, I had to stop the conversation and ask if I was saying something rude. What I learned was that when referring to older persons, *viejo* is indeed not a polite thing to say. It is much better to say *mayor*. And so I adjusted my vocabulary.

Words can be full of meaning. Those who want to use their words carefully will understand the full meaning and context of their words. Some words have such varied and full meanings that they require extra careful attention. Sometimes words mean something completely different depending on their context. Others carry multiple full meanings whenever they are used. We have one such word in our Old Testament reading today, a word brought into greater focus by our Gospel reading, in which Jesus quotes this passage as a rebuke of the Pharisees.

The word is the Hebrew word *hesed*. The Hebrew is translated as “steadfast love” in our passage from Hosea: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”¹ The Greek translation of the Old Testament that was used in Jesus’ day uses the Greek word for mercy to translate *hesed*, so when Jesus is quoting from Hosea in our Gospel passage, he says, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” Further, Jesus instructs the Pharisees to go and learn what this passage means. And if Jesus wants us to learn something, that is a good indicator that we should look further into it.

And really, both the direct Hebrew translation and the one filtered through Greek are fine translations. “Steadfast love” and “mercy” both fit. *Hesed* is a heavy word, filled with meaning.

¹ Hosea 6:6

Often when this word is used in the Old Testament, it is in relation to God's covenant with his people, Israel, a word meaning "steadfast love, kindness, faithfulness, [and] loyalty."² One of the first times this word shows up is in the mouth of Abraham's servant whom Abraham sends to find a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham is continuing to hope in the promise, the covenant that God made with him to make him into a great nation. But Isaac doesn't yet have a wife, great nations require new people. So he sends his servant, and when the servant finds Rebekah, he says, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love (*hesed*) and his faithfulness toward my master."³

Hesed is the refrain of Psalm 136, which tells of God's repeated deliverance of Israel from enemies and his faithfulness in general. It is full of the repeated line, "his steadfast love endures forever." In Moses's song after the crossing of the Red Sea, he says that it is God's *hesed*, his steadfast love, that God has shown in redeeming his people.⁴

And although it is an attribute of God, *hesed*, covenantal faithfulness and goodness, is something that God desires to see in his people as well. "I

² Lexham Theological Wordbook, "Love." I got the quoted definition and various biblical uses from this article.

³ Gen 24:27

⁴ Lexham Theological Wordbook, "Love."

desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.” That God puts a greater valuation on covenantal faithfulness than even the ritualistic sacrifices that he has commanded his people to make is reinforced in our Psalm for today, which says that thanksgiving is a better sacrifice to God than any animal, as if God were such a being that consumed the meat of a sacrifice.

And this brings us to Jesus. Because he stands in this same tradition, though he does much more than stand in it. He is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, but he speaks with them when he tells the Pharisees that they need to learn what it means to seek mercy over sacrifice. At first this is a bit of a head scratcher: what does mercy have to do with covenant love?

But indeed, mercy is an essential element of God’s covenantal love. In the book of Numbers (14:18-19), Moses appeals to God’s *hesed* when he is asking God to spare the people in the desert, even as they are rebelling against God. Mercy is central to the covenant. When a perfect God is in covenant with broken, sinful humans, mercy has to be a part of the picture if the covenant is to be maintained at all.

And so when Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea, he says that God desires mercy. If the Father is merciful to us in his covenantal love, so then are

we to show mercy to others as a sign that we are God's covenantal people. His mercy is our marker.

Think about why Jesus would have brought this up. Jesus has just called Matthew, a tax collector, a partner with the occupying Roman imperial forces, a traitor to his people, who's profiting off of that relationship. When Jesus goes to eat with Matthew and his friends, other tax collectors and those who are on the margins of polite, proper society, he draws the criticism of the Pharisees. His response is dual in nature: first, his use of this covenantal language reminds the Pharisees that God's steadfast, covenant love is full of mercy, mercy that is necessary for anyone, not just the tax collectors, to have a relationship with him. Second, he reminds them that what God desires from those who follow him is that same faithful love, a love that is overflowing with mercy for those who have gone astray. Sick people are the ones who need doctors, Jesus says. And he brings healing. May we learn from the great Physician the power of mercy.

Do you want to bring counter-cultural change? Do you want to provide a Gospel-shaped witness that suggests a better, rightly-ordered world is possible? Ask God to make you merciful. Cultivate a tender heart.

It may seem antithetical in a world that seems and in many ways indeed is so opposed to the truth of the Gospel, but may our tenderness be our witness. Jesus could have rightly rebuked Matthew where he stood for the ways he was acting, but the first thing he did was say, "Follow me," and have a meal with him. If we are going to offer a witness to the Gospel in a post-Christian world, we need to be people of mercy. And indeed, in a merciless world, mercy is one of the ways that we stand up for the Gospel.

It's worth saying that having a tender heart, a merciful heart, does not mean we do not need to be brave, nor does it mean that we should not tell the truth. It is a lie to say that we cannot be merciful and brave at the same time. It is a lie that we cannot be kind and tell the truth. Think of it this way: Jesus was invited into the homes of people to whom he was then able to gracefully tell the truth. Could we say the same about our own lives? Are we living the types of lives that have us invited into the spaces of those who need the Gospel?

I heard a podcast interview this week that has stuck with me.⁵ It was with Ernie Johnson, one of the hosts of TNT's Inside the NBA, a show I have never watched because I do not follow nor do I really care about basketball. But I had heard that Ernie was a Christian and I saw a clip

⁵ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ernie-johnson/id1446810283?i=1000615406988>

that intrigued me, so I gave it a listen. What followed was an hour of wisdom from a life well-lived. Ernie was dropping quotable line after quotable line about not taking your ultimate identity in your job, about owning your mistakes and apologizing for them, and reflections on caring for his son who died of muscular dystrophy at age 33 last year. There was a holy goodness flowing out of this conversation. And when the host asked where that goodness was coming from, Ernie said that it was due to a revitalization of his faith back in the 90s. And understand, this was not on a Christian podcast. Other episodes of this same show would contain things I am sure would cause many eyebrows in this room to raise, including my own.

The host made clear the respect he had for Ernie from the very beginning, and he made it clear why he respected him: Ernie has spent decades being a decent, humble, and kind man in an industry where such people are rare. His goodness towards others was undeniable. And that led to the question, what is behind all this? And how many people who have written off faith got to hear his testimony? The reason Ernie Johnson was in that room and in front of that microphone was the strength of character and the reputation as being a man full of *hesed*. He has learned what it means that God desires mercy and not sacrifice.

I've often reflected on Peter's admonition that we be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us.⁶ My next thought is usually something about how I can live the sort of life that gets people to ask that question. I believe the answer is a life full of *hesed*: grace, love, faithfulness, and mercy.

Let's shift back to that table in the presence of Matthew and his tax collector friends, among those sick who need the doctor. Where do you see yourself around this table? Because we are all somewhere; we all have inhabited multiple spots in this story. But today, are you one of the grateful tax collectors, just relieved that someone is willing to see you not primarily in judgment, but in love? Are you ready to hear the words that he would say to you? Are you ready to lay down the things necessary to follow him?

Or are you more inclined to look upon the table that Jesus is seated at today with disgust, shocked that he would associate with "those" people? Because I've had those days. And when I have those days, those days that I am most convinced that I am not in need of healing, those are the days that I need the healing of the Lord more than ever. I'm the elder brother, standing outside my younger brother's reunion feast, unwilling to come in. The sooner that I realize that it is grace that any of us can be at the

⁶ 1 Peter 3:15.

table with Jesus at all, the sooner I can lay down my own sins and follow him.

Hesed, the steadfast love, the mercy of God, is new every day. That love, in all its fullness, is what fills us up so that we then share it with others. It is what the world needs, and we are tasked to bring it to them. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.