

Mapping the Sacred: The Path of the Heart

Matthew 9:9–13

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

I want to tell you about a moment when I realized that the heart can lead you into places your head would never choose.

It happened years ago when I was sitting across from someone in a coffee shop, someone I had quietly decided I didn’t trust. I had reasons, or at least what I thought were reasons. They were complicated. There had been misunderstandings, things said sideways through other people, stories that felt unfinished.

And so I arrived at that table with my guard up.

I was polite. I was attentive. I even said the right pastoral things. But my heart was not open.

And then, without warning, the conversation shifted.

He began to speak, not defensively, not angrily, but vulnerably. He spoke about loneliness. About feeling misunderstood. About carrying burdens he had never shown anyone.

And in that moment something in me cracked open.

Not dramatically. Not heroically.

Quietly.

The certainty I had carried began to loosen. The categories I had built began to soften. And I felt that strange and uncomfortable movement inside, the movement from judgement toward mercy.

That movement is the **Path of the Heart**.

It is rarely efficient.

It is rarely tidy.

And it almost always asks more of us than we planned to give.

In the gospel today, Jesus walks past a tax booth and sees a man named Matthew sitting there.

“Follow me,” he says.

And Matthew stands up and follows.

Just like that.

But nothing about this moment would have seemed simple to the people watching.

Tax collectors were collaborators with the occupying empire. They were known for exploiting their own neighbours. They were not merely disliked; they were distrusted. They were symbols of everything that felt wrong in the world.

Matthew was the sort of person you avoided. The sort of person you warned your children about. The sort of person respectable religious people kept their distance from.

And Jesus looks at him, not as a category, not as a warning, not as a symbol, but as a person.

That is the **Path of the Heart**.

The **Path of the Heart** is the sacred movement from category to person. From symbol to human. From judgement to curiosity. From distance to encounter.

Matthew follows Jesus, and then something even stranger happens.

Jesus goes to Matthew's house.

And there is a meal.

And not just Matthew.

“Many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.”

You can almost hear the discomfort in that sentence. Many tax collectors. Many sinners. Too many for comfort.

The religious leaders see this and ask the disciples:

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

It is not really a question. It is a protest. A boundary has been crossed.

Because meals matter. Meals signal belonging. Meals say: These are my people. And Jesus is sitting at a table full of people who are not supposed to belong.

Then Jesus says something that echoes across centuries: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

And then he adds: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

Go and learn.

Not memorize.

Not recite.

Learn.

Because mercy is not an idea. Mercy is a way of seeing. Mercy is the practice of the heart.

The Path of the Heart is not sentimentality.

It is not politeness.

It is not pretending that everything is fine.

Mercy does not mean denying harm or ignoring injustice.

Mercy is something deeper.

Mercy is the willingness to see the image of God where we least expect it.

Mercy is the courage to remain present when it would be easier to withdraw.

Mercy is the refusal to reduce another human being to the worst story we know about them.

Jesus does not excuse Matthew.

He does not say tax collecting is fine.

He does not deny the harm that systems of exploitation cause.

Instead, Jesus does something more dangerous.

He makes relationship possible. He brings compassion back to Matthew's life.

Because the **Path of the Heart** believes that transformation begins not with exclusion but with encounter.

And this is hard. Because the heart is vulnerable territory.

If the Path of the Head is about questions...

and the Path of the Soul is about stillness...

then the Path of the Heart is about risk.

The risk of caring.

The risk of being hurt.

The risk of loving people who cannot guarantee they will love us back.

Some of us know this risk very well.

Some of us have opened our hearts and found disappointment waiting there. Some of us have trusted and been misunderstood. Some of us have loved and been left.

And after enough of that, the heart begins to protect itself.

We become careful.

Measured.

Reserved.

We tell ourselves we are being wise.

And sometimes we are.

But sometimes we are simply afraid.

The Path of the Heart does not demand that we throw ourselves into unsafe situations.

Mercy is not the same as self-abandonment.

Jesus himself walked away from crowds.

Jesus set boundaries.

Jesus rested.

The Path of the Heart is not reckless love.

It is grounded love.

Mercy that is rooted in truth.

Compassion that includes ourselves.

But the **Path of the Heart** does ask something of us.

It asks whether we are willing to remain open.

Whether we are willing to let our certainties soften.

Whether we are willing to see people again instead of only remembering the stories we have told about them.

Sometimes the hardest mercy is not for strangers.

Sometimes the hardest mercy is for people we once trusted.

Sometimes the hardest mercy is for people who disappointed us.

Sometimes the hardest mercy is for people who misunderstood us.

Sometimes the hardest mercy is for people who walked away.

And sometimes the hardest mercy is for ourselves.

Because many of us carry quiet shame. Memories of words we wish we had not said. Decisions we wish we could undo. Moments when we were not the person we hoped to be.

And Jesus says: "I desire mercy."

Not sacrifice.

Not punishment.

Not endless self-blame.

Mercy.

The Path of the Heart is where we discover that mercy is not something we generate by effort.

Mercy is something we receive before we give it.

Matthew did not earn his place at the table.

He was invited.

Matthew did not prove himself worthy.

He was called.

Matthew did not transform himself first.

Transformation began with belonging.

That is the scandal of the gospel.

It gives belonging before perfection.

Welcome before worthiness.

Mercy before change.

And perhaps that is why the **Path of the Heart** is sacred.

Because it reveals a God who does not wait for us to become acceptable.

A God who walks past the places where we sit in our compromise and confusion and calls us anyway. A God who sits at tables we thought were closed to us. A God who looks at us not as categories but as beloved persons.

Sometimes Mapping the Sacred leads us into stillness.

Sometimes it leads us into questions.

But today it leads us to the table.

The table where mercy is practiced in ordinary ways.

Listening instead of assuming.

Softening instead of hardening.

Staying instead of withdrawing.

Seeing instead of judging.

And maybe the invitation of this Path is simple.

Not easy.

But simple.

This week, notice where your heart tightens. Notice the person you avoid. Notice the story you keep repeating about someone. Notice where judgement comes quickly.

And then gently ask:

What would mercy look like here?

Because the **Path of the Heart** is not a destination.

It is a way of walking.

One conversation at a time.

One softening at a time.

One table at a time.

And if we walk this Path long enough, we may discover something surprising: that the mercy we offer others is also the mercy that heals us.

And that somewhere along the way we find ourselves sitting at the table with Jesus, wondering how we ever thought we did not belong.

Amen.