



Sermon by: Rev. Teresa A. Larson
Text: Luke 8:40-56

July 6, 2025

Mercy: The Engine of Faith

Last Sunday we spent some time contemplating the theology of mercy using the story of Jonah; not the part where he is swallowed by the fish and spit out (though that part is pretty memorable), but the part after that when the great city of Nineveh heeded Jonah's call to repent and God had mercy on the city; God did not destroy it. Mercy looks for windows of opportunity to let the presence of our gracious and merciful God wash over us, even when it is the least deserved.

Today we're looking at a different expression of God's mercy that can best be defined as healing and relief from suffering, which the stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman give us a glimpse into. The two healings in today's text harmonize together and complement each other. One story begins, then there's a separate story, and then there's the end of the first story. They are juxtaposed, intertwined, meant to be read together. They give us a portrait of God's mercy that meets us in our most desperate moments.

There are significant differences between the cast of characters over these two stories. There's Jairus, the leader of the synagogue who held a relatively high social status and who overcame the obstacles of crowds, pride, and humbled himself to beg for help on behalf of his daughter. There's the woman, opposite from Jairus in almost every way, who was at the end of her rope in seeking help for her condition and barged through the crowd to grab hold of Jesus' robe.

There are also some significant similarities between these stories. Jairus and the woman are both complemented on the strength of their faith that is born out of their urgent need. There is no known solution for their separate situations and they are in a place of dire desperation. As they, and perhaps you, know all too well, God's grace and mercy are the only solutions when it feels like your world is bottoming out.

The urgency that we experience in life may arise in a dramatic, out-of-the-blue kind of crisis, like Jairus' ill daughter. Our urgency could also be a kind of slow burn years in the making that one day explodes, like the woman who had given over everything she had for a cure to her hemorrhaging. But no matter how our sense of urgency sets in, we are likely to encounter resistance along the way, which both parties do in these stories. Their needs are met with a thick crowd, dismissive disciples, and insensitive neighbors. The desperate, vulnerable faith shown in these stories provokes a lot of discomfort. Discomfort makes us fearful. Fear makes us pull away.

Nevertheless, both stories yield the same result. As pastor David Zuhl notes, in both instances, the people are healed and given a way forward. Jairus' daughter experiences a physical resurrection; for the woman, it's a spiritual one. In both cases, the urgent need for mercy becomes the engine for a healing faith.¹

The urgent need for mercy that we feel broadly falls into two categories. There's the urgency that arises from the landscape of our own lives: the people we know and love, the experiences we move through, our own processing of what's happening in our sphere of relationships and our slice of the world. This includes our friends, family, and at times ourselves, who are grieving, struggling, ill, heartbroken, afraid...you name it. Then there's the urgency that arises from the landscape of our shared life together as the people of God; urgent needs that may not directly impact our day-to-day lives too much, but do impact the lives of our neighbors near and far. Food insecurity, inadequate housing, racism, discrimination, restricted access to healthcare, a mounting climate crisis, lives washed away in natural disasters, the dismantling of a social safety net that provides for and protects the most vulnerable among us.

Sometimes we feel both types of urgencies at the same time — the urgent needs in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors. Like the two stories in today's reading, these urgencies play off one another and can harmonize together in such a way that we feel (and may even give in to) our very real propensity to despair. It can also bring forth our very capacity for faith. The urgent need for mercy becomes the engine for a healing faith.

Mercy isn't just a turning away, but a turning toward. Mercy calls us to turn toward the suffering and hurt in the world - not to offer empty platitudes to those who are suffering or to slap band-aids on very deep societal wounds, but to witness to something other than fear and hopelessness. As Christ's disciples, and by God's mercy that has set us free from our sin to love God and neighbor, we must stand firm in our conviction that any thing, any place, or any belief that seeks to scramble our collective capacity to honor the image of God in every person is antithetical to Christ's command to "love your neighbor", no matter where your neighbor is from, what they look like, who they love, what choices they make, or what needs they have.

Indeed, our propensity to despair is real. But so is the strength of our faith when we come together as the people of God to care. To listen and to learn. To speak a word of hope, to share an act of compassion, to trust in the presence of our gracious and merciful God calling us with gentleness and conviction. To be the body of Christ in the world, together. The hum of mercy created by our shared engines of faith harmonize together to bring relief, light, compassion, justice, and healing love to a world so urgently in need of it.

We've named three streams of mercy over the last two weeks: forgiveness from our sins, relief from suffering in our individual lives, and the healing of our broken and

fearful world. We've considered Jonah, Jairus, and a hemorrhaging woman, and I'd like to offer a final illustration of what it looks like when these three streams come together.

Last month marked 10 years since the shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in which white supremacist Dylann Roof shot and killed nine Black parishioners in the middle of their weekly Bible study. It was a horrific incident, and what followed was one of the most powerful instances of urgent need being met with miraculous mercy. During Roof's bail hearing, Nadine Collier, whose mother was shot, addressed Roof: "You took something very precious away from me. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but if God forgives you, I forgive you." Her sentiments were echoed by almost everyone affected by the tragedy.²

Here was an instance where all expressions of the urgent need for mercy come together: with the families and loved ones of those who were shot, the one who did the shooting, and the renewed awareness of the raw wound of racism in our country. The members of Emanuel understood the urgency of witnessing to something more powerful than sin, guilt, shame, and revenge. The mercy that was shared — completely unwarranted — spurred healing and profound, humbling hope that rippled through our collective conscious. That urgent need for mercy did not wait for a certain set of criteria or standards to be met and was not concerned with accountability or good process. This localized need for — and sharing of — mercy produced a response that points all of us to what a faith rooted in the trustworthy truth of our gracious and merciful God looks like.

Whatever urgency is bubbling in your life, the way that Jesus met Jairus and the woman, the way that the families of the victims met Dylann Roof, is the way that Christ meets us: mercifully. Mercy is not a one-time event that heals the world, but it is a powerful practice that keeps our engines of faith running as we consistently tend to the needs of the world, trusting in the presence of our gracious and merciful God as we join in Christ's work of tending to the needs of the world. And the needs of the world are great. So is the strength of our faith when we share this life of discipleship together. May we, together, take hold of the promise of God's mercy, confident in the love of Jesus Christ that calls us in, sends us out, and will never let us go. Amen.

¹ Zuhl, David. (2023, June 1). The Urgency of Mercy. *The Mockingbird*, 139.

² Ibid., 140.