

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
Date: 21 August 2022
Today's Word/Phrase: Mercy
Lesson: Luke 13:10-17 | Isaiah 58:9b-14

¹⁰Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Have you ever noticed how the first couple chapters of Luke's gospel are basically a musical? Throughout the narration of Jesus' birth, there is a lot of singing taking place. First, Mary sings a song, and shortly after that Zechariah begins to sing after his newborn son is given the name John. Then there are the angels that sing to the shepherds. Finally, there is the song of Simeon, which is sung when the baby Jesus is presented at the temple. Now, there are a lot of things that people can like about musicals. You may have noticed a recurring element in musicals is that the opening songs establish the themes for the whole story. Often it establishes the values of the community – like Circle of Life does in The Lion King, or Tradition in Fiddler on the Roof. Or, notice that the first song by the protagonist reveals the journey they will undergo. The songs at the beginning of Luke

something similar: these songs proclaim that God is merciful and just, and these songs foretell that this divine mercy and justice will be embodied.

Making a jump forward in the script, we find today's example of that theme playing out. The scene is a sabbath gathering inside a synagogue, and there is a woman who has an ailment that has kept her bent over for 18 years. What the gospel doesn't say – but medical professionals do – is that this woman likely was in a constant state of severe pain combined with fatigue and a difficulty of breathing. Eighteen years. On top of it all were the social difficulties and stigmas that she likely experienced.

It is kind of an open-and-shut gospel lesson, right? She is healed by Jesus, someone complains that he did this on the Sabbath, he calls out the hypocrisy, they are put to shame, and the crowd rejoices. The takeaway is basically on one hand “Hooray, Jesus!” and on the other hand “Don't be a hypocrite.” If that is the only takeaway, we can wrap this up and go home, right? Well, we can either settle for that, or we can step into the new.

An unmentioned part of this story is that there was an ongoing debate at that time that sheds light on this scene. See, the command to not work on the Sabbath never defined what counts as work. So it has always been up for interpretation – even to this day – and we know this was a highly discussed topic in 1st century Israel because we have the writings. The teachings of that day list thirty-nine categories of labor that were generally understood as to be avoided on the Sabbath. However, healing someone is not on the list. The reason is because the consensus was that healing – or the healthcare provided by physicians, midwives, and others – is a good act that shouldn't be delayed. But there was debate about whether any healthcare should be avoided on the Sabbath. Everyone agreed that lifesaving measures were permissible, but what about non-life-threatening predicaments, like a person's relief from her back pain? Some said this is permissible on the Sabbath – it's still healthcare that shouldn't be delayed – and others argued that it could wait a day, and therefore it should be avoided on the Sabbath.

So when Jesus weighs in on the topic in today's lesson, he is not bringing to the table an enlightened view that no one had previously considered. Jesus was engaging in his community's ongoing deliberation. He sides with the part of the community that sees the work of healthcare as an

act of mercy. Allowing healthcare to happen on the Sabbath is not only a merciful act toward the person with the ailment, but it also shows mercy to the community. “How does the work of healing on the Sabbath extend mercy to the community?” you may ask. Because when a community is gripped by a fear that they might upset God if they were to show care to a fellow human, and therefore they won’t show care, then it is an act of mercy to step up and say to the community, “Hey! Keep in mind that God is overwhelmingly merciful! So go and do the merciful thing for your neighbor!” It is an act of mercy to help break people out of an unwarranted fear of God’s anger – a fear that prevents them from being a loving neighbor – especially when God time and again tells us that divine anger is short lived, while divine mercy and love are steadfast and everlasting.

Jesus’ teaching and healing are fulfilling the themes introduced at the beginning of Luke’s gospel. He is the embodiment of the radical good news for the poor. He is bringing release for the captives and emancipation for those who are oppressed. For the woman in the story, who struggled for so long physically and socially, this was more than a healing. What Jesus gave was release from her ailment, which allowed her to be a full part of her community again. For the crowd gathered at the synagogue, this was more than a healing for them to witness. This was emancipation from a mindset that constantly warned that we could easily upset God. On that day the crowd heard Jesus authoritatively come down on the side of the debate that says we should be merciful toward others – and to ourselves – just as God is merciful toward us.

Our lesson from Isaiah is beautiful and I hope you’ll give it another look. The whole thing follows a pretty straightforward If/Then construction, however, be careful how you read it. Don’t read as though if you do an act, then you will receive a reward. Instead, it is more about when you do an act, there is a promise to see things in a new light. It can be helpful to read it again while replacing the “Ifs” with “Whens.”

“[When] you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ... [When] you honor [the Sabbath], not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD.”

What the passage is saying is that when we show mercy to our neighbor, and when we gratefully receive God's merciful gift of Sabbath rest, then we will delight all the more in God's mercy.

We at All Saints are about to enter a new chapter in our life together. The final phase of the renovations is under way and within three weeks we will be worshiping in our sanctuary once again. The kids will have their classrooms, and the staff will have space to do our work. In light of these renovations, I think it is important to think about the old and new things. However, less about the physical old and new, but the opportunity this presents for us as people. Settling for the old in our case would be acknowledging the architectural changes but then saying, "Okay, now we can get back to what we were doing," without giving it any more thought than that. Stepping with confidence into the new would be acknowledging the changes and then saying, "God is doing something new here. How can we best prepare ourselves for this new chapter as a congregation?"

Today's lesson asks us to live into God's mercy. To be merciful to others and to ourselves, just as God has shown us mercy. A guiding principle that directed the renovations was the priority to be a welcoming space. We've prepared the building to be welcoming, but I ask us to consider how we can prayerfully prepare ourselves to be welcoming. What – if anything – do you need to hand over to God and request, "Make me merciful as you are merciful. Make me as welcoming as you are welcoming." As we spend these next few weeks awaiting our congregation's return to its renewed sanctuary, may we also spend them prayerfully considering God's mercy and welcome and asking how they may renew us.

Amen.