

Tracy Daub  
6/11/23—University Presbyterian Church  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

## MERCY, MERCY, ME

It would not be unreasonable to conclude that the gospel accounts of Jesus' life are primarily a series of events in which Jesus pisses people off. He is always doing things which, at their mildest, generate astonishment and at their extreme, enrage people. It is fair to say that a lot of the time in a lot of the gospel stories, people are critical of Jesus.

And today's story from scripture begins the same way. So what was Jesus' offense today? Well, Jesus was eating with the wrong kinds of people. Gathered around him at the table were some of his community's most offensive people. Tax collectors. Tax collectors were traitors to their community because they collaborated with the Roman Empire to extract excessive sums of money from the already impoverished people. Tax collectors got rich off the sufferings of their people. And because of this, they were despised by their community. And it's easy to understand the contempt people had for them. Tax collectors were part of and benefitted from a system of great injustice.

Perhaps we might consider contemporary examples of people who act in similar way that may offend us. Think about executives of corporations whose greed lead them to cut corners on their products in ways that endanger the consumer, or who outright lie about their product so people will invest in it. And then how ordinary folks have sometimes lost their life savings on such investments. Or insurance companies who take the hard earned dollars of working folks but find some loophole not to pay out when a claim is filed. Or politicians whose hate-filled rhetoric incites violence and intolerance. Who are the people you find morally and ethically

objectionable? Who are the people for whom you would be shocked and outraged to find Jesus dining at their table? I have some people in my mind. And I bet you can come up with some as well.

The religious leaders witness who Jesus is eating with and are outraged. And when they express their disapproval, Jesus says, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

Jesus justifies his actions on the basis of mercy. He regards eating with these tax collectors as an act of mercy.

What do we mean when we speak about mercy? Just what *is* mercy?

Some of us might say mercy means forgiveness. And that is true. An aspect of mercy is sometimes forgiveness. Think about when a criminal makes an appeal to the court for mercy. Mercy *can* include forgiveness—but not always.

Let’s return to Jesus again as an example. The rest of our reading today from Matthew’s gospel reveals Jesus engaged in other acts of mercy. After this discussion about his dinner companions, Jesus is approached by a man whose daughter has died and he pleads with Jesus to come see her because he believes that Jesus can restore her to life. Jesus responds mercifully. He gets up and goes with this man and raises this child back to life. It is an act of mercy.

But remember that on his way to the little girl’s house, Jesus is interrupted by a woman who has suffered years of hemorrhaging. But instead of being annoyed by her interruption, Jesus takes the time to engage the woman—to see her, to hear her, to be present with her in that moment. And through his mercy, the woman is healed.

Notice how neither of these two events—the healing of the little girl and the healing of the woman who was hemorrhaging—neither involved the element of forgiveness. And yet both

involved the giving of mercy. Mercy is more than just forgiveness. Mercy involves kindness, compassion, and care. Both the woman and the little girl were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Neither of them would be people of social importance. But Jesus showed them mercy. Jesus used the power he had to extend kindness, compassion, and care.

Jesus reminded the religious leaders who were upset with him for eating with tax collectors of the quote from the prophet Hosea: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” Ritual sacrifices of animals and other offerings were part of how the people of Jesus’ day worshipped God. These were important rituals, just like the kinds of rituals we have in our worship services like baptism, or communion, or singing hymns. Jesus was *not* saying that our worship rituals are bad. What he was saying is that the greatest thing God desires from us, the greatest way we can honor God, is not through our religious rituals but through our acts of mercy toward one another. And so Jesus, living out mercy, sat down and ate with broken and imperfect people like tax collectors, and spent his time and efforts to touch and heal a socially unimportant people like the hemorrhaging woman and the little girl.

Mercy lies at the core of the Christian faith. We Christians praise God for the mercy God has shown us—even while we are broken and imperfect. Our Christian faith is rooted in the receiving and in the giving mercy.

But what does mercy look like in our ordinary lives? The writer Vinita Hampton Wright contemplates this question and she concludes that mercy does not typically show up in grand gestures but rather that most of the time “mercy reveals itself in fleeting moments.”

“For example,” she adds, “mercy gives you his seat on the bus, acting as if he was about to get up anyway rather than making you feel that he is doing you a favor. Mercy does not let out that sigh—you know the one—the wordless disapproval toward the person in the check-out-

line ahead of you whose card didn't swipe, or who can't find her coupons, or whose toddler is having a meltdown. Mercy offers quiet sympathy and does not convey with her body language that this holdup is ruining her day. Sometimes mercy chooses not to send back the food that isn't just right, simply because the waitress looks overwhelmed.

“When mercy has been wronged, the offended one does not make it difficult for the offender to apologize or ask forgiveness . . . Likewise, at work, at home or in the classroom, mercy creates an atmosphere in which a person feels safe enough to admit his mistake or ask a question. And if mercy must correct someone . . . she does so gently without vindictive relish.

“Mercy makes a habit of giving others the benefit of the doubt . . . Mercy gives charitably, knowing that eventually someone will take advantage of his generosity. Mercy welcomes you, fully aware that this act may disrupt her own plans . . .

“Mercy makes it his business to help others succeed. Mercy clears the way for others, so that they can walk on an even path, no matter how halting their steps or injured their souls.

“In all these situations,” Vinita writes, “mercy treats power as a sacred trust. I can be merciful because I have some sort of power, the means to affect another's life, if only for a moment. I act mercifully when I use my power to do kindness in this world.”

Vinita's words invite us to consider mercy as something that is tied to power. Mercy is using the power we have to affect another person's life for the good. You and I have this power—the power to share mercy in our everyday lives. God has shared this power with us. We can be merciful as God is merciful.

And this invites us to consider the concept of sin in a new light. How differently might we think about the place of sin in our lives if we regarded sin as our failure to exercise this power, the power of mercy? We know the big ticket items everyone thinks of as sinful. But

what if our biggest sins were found in the withholding of mercy--ordinary, everyday kinds of mercy as well as giant leaps of mercy?

Vinita Hampton Write states that “mercy has become my new sin detector, a personal barometer. ‘Am I showing mercy?’”

Exercising the power of mercy involves not only responding mercifully to situations we may encounter by chance in our daily lives but also actively and intentionally putting ourselves in situations where we can offer mercy.

Last Sunday, members of UPC extended mercy by participating in Buffalo’s Gay Pride Parade. Howard Henry shared that as the UPC float bearing our church’s name moved down the parade route, people watching the parade would run up to our members and give them high fives. Others cheered from the sidelines. And still others became emotional upon seeing a church showing solidarity and love toward them and with tears in their eyes shouted or mouthed the words, “thank you.”

Can we not see the power that lies in mercy? It’s the power to heal deep wounds. It’s the power to soften the human heart. It’s the power to connect us to one another. It’s the power of God. And this power, this holy and sacred power, resides in you.