

# “Have Mercy On Me”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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## Hebrews 7:23-28

*Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

*For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever.*

## Mark 10:46-52

*They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you take all that we carry within, the concerns, the joys, the distractions, and those things that are important. I pray that you would take the words we offer in song and in prayer. I pray that you would take our scripture readings for today and the word that you've laid upon my heart to share this morning. Touch, bless, and transform those into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word do its work in our hearts and in our minds, in our imaginations, and especially in our faith. And as we come this day to the table and prepare ourselves, let your word feed us, let it guide us and encourage us, and let it be what we say and what we do in the week ahead. We ask this all in Christ's name. Amen.

As I was coming to work on Friday after being on vacation, I thought I had a sermon all figured out. And then yesterday happened and I feel that I need to sort of lay aside what I wanted to say because it just didn't seem to fit where I find myself this morning. As I've reflected upon the news of yesterday and earlier in the week--the fact that 13 pipe bombs were sent to Democratic folks, critics of the President--the fact that a man tried to get into a black church in Louisville, Kentucky and was thwarted by the fact that the door was locked and so instead he went and killed people at a grocery store--and then the fact that 11 people were killed yesterday at a synagogue in Pittsburgh as well as all those that were wounded, especially those who went to provide protection to those that were being targeted--I find myself needing to say a different word this day than what I had intended.

And to be honest, I'm not sure that I have a coherent word to offer. I find my heart somewhat broken this morning, especially on this Reformation Sunday. A Sunday where in our tradition we honor our roots as Protestants. We point back 500 years to Martin Luther, the Catholic monk who hammered proposals on a door in Germany and began, unbeknownst to him, began a new movement, the movement that became Protestantism in the life of the faith and the church of God across the world.

And so as we think about reaching back to 500 years of Martin Luther, I want to reach back even further. I want to reach back all the way to the beginning of our faith and beyond, because I want us to remember that the Jesus we call the Christ did not consider himself a Christian. He was Jewish. He was raised in the Jewish tradition. He went to synagogue. He learned the Torah. And as an adult, he went and spoke and interpreted the law. And so when there is an attack on 11 people who gather for a naming ceremony in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, we need to know that that's an attack on our traditions and our cousins in the faith. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. The Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. And we need to never forget that. And so when we hear of antisemitism or we confront it on social media or in the mouths of those that we know, we need to speak up against it and to bear witness to the fact that the one we believe in and trust in who is the Son of God is also the Son of Man and the son of a Jewish man at that.

I'm inspired by my sermon today from a series that I saw in Netflix some time ago. It's called The Secret Life of Lance Letscher. And I may have mentioned this in past sermons, but Lance Letscher is a collage artist, and he's from Austin, Texas. And he goes around in these antique stores, and he finds drawings of things that he wants to cut out and include in his collages. And I just was fascinated to see the airplanes and the buildings and all the things that he was able to cut out so neatly from these old, old catalogs and magazines, and then bring them into new life by arranging them on a background with color and stripes. And he took what was old, and he transformed it into something new and beautiful. And I want to offer for you some sense of finding those things that you can incorporate into a collage that hopefully can make sense in a broken world that we live in.

I'm also mindful of learning about an art when I was doing some graduate work called bricolage, which I'm not very good at French and I don't know if this is true, but to me, it's the taking of two words and kind of smashing them together - bric-a-brac and collage. And you come up with this fancy-sounding word bricolage. And what it means is simply that you piece together the things that you're able to find. You have elements that are significant or meaningful to you and you hang on to them and incorporate them into your life story. Or if you're trying to make a collage, you put them onto that piece of art because it matters to you. And so what I want to offer today are some pieces maybe not coherent as in a sense of a whole that's woven together, but pieces that are meaningful, and I hope, helpful to you as you think about your faith and as you think about how we are to live it in the days ahead. The first thing that I want to offer is from the text. It is the phrase Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me. As is my practice after I sit with the text for a day or two, I go to the lectionary studies, the commentaries, and I read what other people think is going on in these passages. And this week one of my professors from Princeton wrote the commentary on Mark, the [inaudible] commentary, and he said that when Bartimaeus says, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me--" he says, "That's a really convenient translation of a really complicated phrase in Greek." He said, "The best iteration of that phrase in English is probably simply, 'Jesus, son of David, help me.'" "Have mercy on me," sounds very religiously correct and polished, and he said, "No, it's much more guttural. Help me, Lord. Help me, son of David." This is the prayer of the blind beggar sitting beside the road. "Help me." And I think it's important for us to realize that sometimes, when we find ourselves in uncharted territory or facing situations that we're not sure what to do about, the simple prayer, "Lord, help me," is a really valid, valid prayer. The next thing I want to offer is also from the texts and it's one of those things that, as we read the story or hear it, it goes by so quickly that it just-- it doesn't register at all, but as I read it, and I slowed down and read it, it-- for some reason, it just grabbed me by the heart. And it's what happens right after Bartimaeus says, for the second time, "Son of David, help me." Jesus stood still.

Now, you might not think that that's significant. Of course, Jesus is moving through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem to much more important things. There's a blind beggar saying help me. And, oh, Jesus stood still and said, "Call him over here." It's a nothing. It's a throwaway, but I want to retrieve it and bring it back, and I want to offer it to us as a very, very significant piece of our faith and what we can do when we have situations that are coming at us, and we're not sure what to do, or what to say, or how to deal with it. Jesus stood still. And I'm going to give you an example of this that's a little bit humorous, a little bit political, and I pray to God I don't offend anybody. Okay. So I'm driving to church, thinking about all this stuff and trying to figure out how do I pray about this? What do I do about-- and I notice yard signs, and there's a lot of political yard signs out, right? You've seen them. There's purple ones, and white ones, and red ones, and blue ones, and all kinds of yard signs. Well, I'm at the stop sign on my way here and there's two signs, so you can't miss it, for people going both ways, and it says at the top, "Drain the swamp," and then there's a-- the bottom part of it is the word [Claire?] with a red circle and a diagonal line through it and then the outline of Missouri. And I sat there and noticed the sign, and for some reason, it just infuriated me because I thought, in today's world, do we need to be against something or can we just be for something? And so then I thought, "Well, I know what I'm going

to do. I'm going to go find Josh Hawley signs and I'm going to go buy four of them and I'm going to come back and I'm going to put two right around that sign and two around the other sign to make sure that people can see the Josh Hawley red signs not the anti-Claire Drain the Swamp signs. And then I thought, "No David don't do that. That's not a good thing to do" [laughter]. And so then my next thought was, "I'm just going to get out of the car, it's Sunday morning, I'm going to get the signs, lift them up, put them in the back of the car and drive to church" [laughter]. And my next thought was, "That would be really cool." You're up preaching and here comes the police right down the aisle [laughter] and saying, "Excuse me, come with me you've stolen some property from some neighbors who are exercising their free right of speech and da-da-da." And I'm like, "Yeah, it was me," and then, no, no no.

And then, finally, what rose up was breathe. And I breathed enough to determine between there and here that I would not share that story [laughter]. So like I said, this is broken pieces I'm offering you, not pure wisdom. But it's something to think about and it's something to think about especially given the climate of what's happening in our world right now. Why do we need to be against? Why can't we simply just be for? And advocate, advocate for whatever we're for. Again, it's just something to think about and to hold.

The next piece that I want to offer is kind of a weird connection that I made. Last week Jani and I were on the beach in Hawaii on Sunday morning. Yeah, I know, you feel really sorry, I appreciate the murmur [laughter]. And we got on a plane to come home and usually I ignore all the safety stuff, fasten your seatbelt, da-da-da, and in the unlikely event that there's a water landing your seat bottom can be used as a floatation device and there's a vest in a pocket underneath you and you put it on. So when you're thinking that the first half of your flight from Honolulu to Atlanta is all over water you kind of pay attention to that. And so for the first time ever I actually felt down under my seat like, "Where's that vest. Okay, there it is." I prayed to God that I would never use it. And I want to - this sounds so obvious at some level but - what do we hang on to in our lives when we are being tossed to and fro by all of the news and by what's happening? And Jesus says it and we know it and the kids know it better than us adults: your faith has made you well. So grab onto that faith - the love, the joy, the peace, the comfort - hug it close and trust it. Trust that God's goodness is still at work. And I realized that as, especially given the news of this past week, sometimes it's hard to see that goodness. And we need to look at the thin edges of life sometimes to see little glimmers of it. But hang on to it cause it will save us, it will restore us, it will rescue us when we think we're about to go under. And the last thing that I want to share with you is a nugget of something you might want to incorporate, it's not this first part, it's the second part but-- so I came to work this morning after being gone and on my desk is an envelope and it's to me from amazon.com. Merry Christmas to me. I love Amazon packages. I'm an Amazon addict. I admit it and if there's AA meetings, Amazon Anonymous, I need to go. I open up the package and I pull out a book and it's called Almost Everything: Notes on Hope by Anne Lamott. I love Anne Lamott. She wrote Bird by Bird. Is that what it was? Yeah. A phenomenal writer. And I realized too that I'm almost 54 and I don't remember ordering it. It just showed up. So I'm like, "Well, that's a gift from God." And I'm thinking okay, "You've got to preach on all this terrible news and what's going on. What does Anne say [laughter]?"

First words, "I'm stockpiling antibiotics for the apocalypse [laughter], even as I await the blossoming of paperwhites on the windowsill in the kitchen. The news of late has captured the fever dream of modern life: everything exploding, being shot, or crashing to the ground all around us, while growing older as provided me with a measure of perspective and equilibrium, and a lovely, long-term romance. Towns and cities, ice fields, democracy, people-all disappear, while we rejoice and in the spring and the sweetness of old friendships. Families are tricky. There is so much going on that flattens us, that is huge, scary, or simply appalling. We're doomed, stunned, exhausted, and overcaffeinated. And yet-- And yet, outside my, yellow roses bloom, and little kids horse around, making a joyous racket."

This is how she begins her book. And this is how it ends, "Life is way wilder than I am comfortable with, way farther out, as we used to say, more magnificent, more deserving of awe and, I would add, more benevolent--well-meaning, kindly. Waves and particles, redwoods, poetry, this world of wonders and suffering, great crowds of helpers and humanitarians, here we are alive right now, together. I worry myself sick about the melting ice caps, the escalating, the arms race, and the polluted air as I look forward with hope to the cleansing rains, coming spring, the warmth of summer, the student marches. John Lennon said, 'Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end,' and as this has always been true before, we can hope it will be again. We have all we need to come through. Against all odds, no matter what we've lost, no matter what messes we've made over time, no matter how dark the night, we offer and are offered kindness, soul, light, and food, which create breath and spaciousness, which create hope, sufficient unto the day." The table is ready. Let us eat. Amen.