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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Lamentations 3:22-33, Mark 5:21-43

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have just sung my sermon text. That hymn, almost still reverberating in the air, comes from this morning's First Lesson:

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
²³they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23, NRSV)

It was a happy soul, I bet, a soul akin to the Biblical writer's, that composed these words we just sang:

Great is thy faithfulness!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed thy hand hath provided;
great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me! (*With One Voice* 771)

This morning's Gospel stories give us lovely illustrations of this great theme from Lamentations: The steadfast love of the Lord *never* ceases. Every morning his tender mercies are new. And so it was that on that sunny Gospel morning in Palestine, the mercies of the LORD were new once more, to answer the misery of sickness and death. A father fears for his daughter, for she is near death, and a woman is near despair over her unending flow of blood, but that morning the tender mercies of the LORD were fresh again, and he saved those in need.

THE DIVINE HEART

Our text from Lamentations gives us a wonderful testimony concerning the *heart* of God. It is worth everything, if we stop and think about it. To say that our Lord's love and mercy never come to an end means that there is an inexhaustible supply of patience and affection in our Lord. This bodes well for us and for the world.

Some folks show mercy, but it is cool and begrudging. It seems to spring not from a sympathetic heart, but from a *notion*, a calculation that, all things considered, mercy would be the better path. So, they give love, but not their hearts. They give help because, with their minds, they judge it to be the right thing to do, but their heart is not really in it. If I am weary or vexed, I can be like that, to

my shame, at the office door when dealing with people asking for a handout. I can show mercy, but my mind and my heart are back at my desk with what I was working on till I was interrupted. The other day, for example, four folks came to our church office door in the space of ten minutes. No sooner had I talked with one, than another came. And then another, and then another. I tried to deal conscientiously with each one, but I cannot say that I gave my heart to each one. And this is a common human experience, I think. If pressed too much, we can run out of patience and sympathy.

But this is how we differ from the Lord. His steadfast *never* ceases. His tender mercies *never* come to an end. This is a great revelation of the heart of our God.

And mind you, there is nothing *outside* the Lord compelling him to show steadfast love. No beloved teacher stands there encouraging the Lord to be merciful. And there is no crowd before which he feels he must look good. No, if our God *does* good, it is simply because he *is* good. If he shows mercy, it is because in his heart-of-hearts, he is *full* of mercy.

DUTY IS GOOD, BUT A LOVING HEART EVEN BETTER

So my goal in this sermon is to praise the steadfast love and the tender mercies of our God. But before I turn to that, let me pause for a clarification. In praising the loving heart of God, I do not mean to put down those who do good, not from a loving heart, but from duty. We human beings are somehow at our best, or at least on the road there, when we do our duty, regardless of the stirrings of our heart. From the point of view of all the misery in this world, what matters is that we feed the hungry, tend the sick and dying, visit the lonely, and do our jobs well, regardless of whether our hearts are warm and eager to do the good. In fact, if we wait for eager hearts, a whole lot of good might go missing in this world. Furthermore, it is an ancient principle of morality that character and heart tend to follow along after the deeds we do, so that practicing goodness or even pretending to be good are important steps toward actually becoming good.

So, I do not want to discount duty and the cool performance of what we judge to be good. Seek the good, strive for it even when you are tired and vexed. The good day will come when our hearts will catch up with our deeds, for the day draws near when the knowledge of the Lord will fill every heart, and then doing good will be easy. Till then, let us strive for the good *as if* we were wholly good.

Still, there is something wonderful about being able to say that the steadfast love of *the Lord* never ceases and his mercy never comes to an end. It is a reason for joy to think that the heart of God is continually inclined toward kindness and help.

Let me give you a comparison from the world of sport. The great boxer Muhammad Ali once said that champions aren't made in gyms, but are made from something within:

Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them a desire, a dream, a vision. They have to have the skill and the will. But the will must be stronger than the skill.

Likewise with moral champions: It is good for us to do our duty. But it will be even better when what we do springs from a loving heart. It will be better because it will be easier on us, with fewer frowns on our foreheads and scowls on our faces, and it will be easier on those who receive help from us. It seems to be the case that the steadfast love of the Lord and his tender mercies do not exhaust him, but rather let him be most truly who he is! That is a great ideal for us too: to so train our hearts that doing good is not burdensome, but rather a way of being true to ourselves.

In any case, our God has that kind of a heart: he has a heart that continually inclines toward kindness and mercy. Let's see this on display in today's Gospel Lesson.

JAIRUS

Jairus comes to Jesus, begging our Lord to save his daughter. Of course he comes! Of course he pleads. Any of us would have done the same. His daughter is dying. All of the man's prestige as a ruler of the synagogue is not enough in this case. His standing as a leader of the community does not suffice. If Jesus does not save his daughter, there is none to save her. So, Jairus lays aside his dignity and simply falls at the feet of Jesus, begging for the life of his daughter. Let him be a bishop, a mayor, a famous athlete, or a rock star: none of that matters to Jairus now. What matters is his dear daughter. So, he has to hope that Jesus can look upon him and his daughter with sympathy. I can get weary of answering the door. Jairus has to hope that Jesus does not get too weary to answer his door.

And because the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, Jesus resolves to go with Jairus to heal the daughter. You can well imagine the haste with which the father would love to lead Jesus to his daughter's sickbed¹. He would rush Jesus there if he could, but Jesus is pressed upon by the crowds, and it is like herding cats to try to get them all there to his daughter's bedside.

THE WOMAN AND HER MISERY

Then, suddenly Jesus stops. He claims that someone has touched him. He does not mean that someone has brushed up against him, for that must have happened many a time in that multitude, but that someone has laid hold on him in hope. And that one -- a woman who has suffered for twelve years -- has indeed received a blessing. Her ailment has been healed. She can feel that she is well again, after

¹ A point made about our Gospel Lesson by Charles Campbell in *The Lectionary Commentary on the Gospels*.

twelve years of misery. This is good -- very good. Disappointment had followed disappointment in a weary cycle enduring those dozen years. Her hopes had been dashed again and again, and her money had been uselessly spent. Poverty had been added to her illness, magnifying it, but now she has won healing from Jesus. But our Lord has something even better in mind. St. Paul praised God and encouraged the Ephesians by teaching them that our God is able to do “far more abundantly than all we ask or think”:

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21, RSV)

And so it was for this woman. The steadfast love of Jesus desired to do more for her than she had imagined. She hoped he would heal her, and he did. But more than that, he gave her his blessing. There was no need for her to slink away, as if she had stolen a miracle. He lets her go in peace, with her head high:

³⁴And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (Mark 5:34, RSV)

MEANWHILE

Meanwhile, you can imagine the frustration of Jairus. He is not mistaken in thinking that time is of the essence. He feared that his daughter was near death, and as it turned out, he was right. People come from his house and announce the sad news:

“Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?” (Mark 5:35, RSV)

But what did our text say? What did Lamentations sing about the Lord: That his steadfast love *never* ends! The people from Jairus’s house might have supposed that the death of the girl ended the matter, that the love and compassion of Jesus are no longer relevant once the girl has died. But the love of Jesus knows no such limits. Not even death can calm down the fire of his love. So, he restores the girl to life and gives his happy final instruction, “Give her something to eat.”

LOVING ALL ALIKE

This interweaving of the story of Jairus and the woman who touched the hem of our Lord’s garment permits us a glimpse into the kind of heart that Jesus has. Jairus loves his daughter. Naturally he does. But Jesus loves all of humanity in that way. He loves the daughter of Jairus with a steadfast love, but also he loves this

grown daughter of Israel with a love like that of Jairus for his daughter. In the world of our Lord's love and mercy, children are not favored above sick grown-ups the rest of the world would just as soon forget about. The love of Jairus for his daughter is a kind of image of the love that Jesus has for each of us.

TAKE IT TO HEART

Let us each of take this morning's text to heart and apply it to ourselves. It is easy to love a child who lies sick and helpless in bed. Our heart reaches out to the child and we hope she gets well. We pray for that for all children. There is a photo on the front page of this morning's *New York Times*, for example, that about breaks the heart. It is about the reappearance of "the lost boys of Sudan."² Children are wondering, carrying one another on their little backs, filling their stomachs with grass, trying to dodge gunfire and lions, trying to reach refugee camps. It renews our prayers that Jesus will come again quickly and end this misery! It is easy to love all the little children of the world.

But Jesus loves us each one that way, even if we are no longer children. The child's skin wears no wrinkles. She still has innocence in good measure, without the long history of sins and failures that many of us have accumulated. But Jesus loves each of us like mother or father loves the child, though our hair might be grey, our eyes dim, our hearing declining, and our accomplishments meager or even a burden on this world. There must be something wonderful about the eyes of Jesus, for he seems able to look upon the most humble, disappointing, and even wicked of us and to see someone lovely in his eyes. His steadfast love never ends, his tender mercies never cease, and his goodness is new every morning. And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

² http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/world/africa/from-sudan-a-new-wave-of-lost-boys.html?_r=1&hp