

The title of today's sermon comes from a church bulletin typo – rather than correctly listing the title of our final hymn today, “There's a Wideness in God's Mercy” this certain church listed the hymn as, “There's a Wildness in God's Mercy.”

I want to suggest, I want to make the case this morning, I want to try and prove to you this morning that there is much truth in this typo. I want to contend that in scripture we certainly hear that God's mercy is “wide” and we are also reminded over and over again that God's mercy is wild, that God's mercy is every bit as “wild” as it is “wide”. Thanks be to God that we can never predict and certainly not control: the gracious, astounding wideness and the tender, shocking wildness of God's mercy.

By the time the sermon ends I hope you will be open to receive the wide, wild mercy that God has for creation, and that God has for you! I hope you will be reminded and convinced that there is a welcome for you in Jesus Christ, I hope you will be encouraged to reach forward and reach out and reach up to God so that you can experience all over again the wildness of God's mercy – a wildness, a mercy, that will move you and change you and convert you and direct all you will do and say and be in the name and after the example of Jesus Christ.

“On a Sabbath...” So begins one of the most shocking stories in the Gospels. Jesus is on the road with the disciples making his way toward Jerusalem. Like any good Jewish male, he comes to the local synagogue for Sabbath worship. Recognized as a rabbi, Jesus is invited to read the Scriptures and to teach. As Jesus serves in this way He sees a woman who is weighed down, bent-over in her spirit and the plot thickens.

The woman represents double trouble in this story. To the ruler of the synagogue, and those religious leaders who cared first and foremost about keeping the Sabbath rules, the woman is big trouble. A woman alone, not belonging to, not “owned” by a husband is to them, the lowest of the low. You will notice that she doesn't even have a name. Like a ballet dancer at UFC 64 or a green advocate at a Monster Truck show, this woman in the synagogue, during worship, is out of place. Maybe she is late because of her crippling condition, and arrives unintentionally as the service is underway, instead of getting there early enough to get behind the screen that kept the women in their place. Or, maybe, the women are seated above the men in a women's gallery, but she, unable to climb the stairs, is shuffling around in the back of the room, trying not to be seen. She is there, in the synagogue, quite out of place, she is an embarrassment to everyone who glances at her, past her, through her.

For another thing, the congregation wished they didn't have to look upon her twisted and crippled body, a reminder of something they would rather forget. The ancient equivalent of our more modern, “we come to church to be entertained, not to be reminded of all the pain and hurt in the world and what is wrong with our lives!” Everyone sees an issue, everyone sees a problem, a break in the normal routine, a twist in the rules, a train wreck about to happen, everyone sees trouble...everyone that is, except Jesus, who sees a person trapped in a crippled body and so it is that tenderly, gently, Jesus calls her to come and for them to be close.

Shock! Horror! Jesus is seated up front, on the leader's bench, now, the woman is not only present in worship, but she is now the focus of attention, she is standing even in front of the men. Jesus stoops down to look her in the eye, as we would in order to speak to a child. For his watchers the problem with Jesus is that he treats this embarrassing creature like a person. Repulsive as she is, and a woman,

Jesus does what may be unforgivable to the leader of the synagogue: he touches her. Rabbis didn't associate with women, much less touch them. And what a touch, not a touch of reproach, not a touch telling her to hide away or be gone to her proper place but Jesus' touch is a touch of blessing. Jesus lays his hand upon her, blessing her, and she is healed, standing straight and praising God. In the receiving of the blessing, this once bent woman is not only healed—she is blessed, something only males would expect in their Jewish and secular culture.

What had been thought unlikely, unthinkable, ungodly, and utterly without precedent, until Jesus came on the scene, happens before their very eyes. The rage of the ruler of the synagogue shifts from the women to Jesus. Trumpeque, the apoplectic ruler, growing ever more red in the face, points at Jesus and says, "Jesus, you are fired!" Jesus has become double trouble! By healing the woman Jesus has broken the "do not work" rule of the Sabbath, and bringing deliverance He has as much as claimed to be the Messiah! How absolutely incredible! The Messiah dressed as an itinerant preacher, dusty and dirty from days on the road? The Messiah - looking like an ordinary man? The Messiah - breaking the rules of the Sabbath?

The ruler of the synagogue is so irate over what Jesus' actions might mean for the rules, that he completely misses seeing God at work through Jesus, bringing healing. Unwilling to get in Jesus' face, the man uses his well-honed skills as a rabble rouser in trying to stir up the crowd. In response, Jesus addresses all those who put rules and keeping of them above the true meaning of the Sabbath, stating that there is no better thing to do on the Sabbath than "to make the wounded whole," and, "to heal the sin-sick soul". The bent-over woman rejoiced. Like the Israelites liberated from slavery, like Daniel free from the lion's den, she was liberated able to know and believe for the first time in a long time that she too was, what she always had been, even when she was bent over - a child of Abraham. Her freedom, her healing, her deliverance was the result of the wildness of the mercy of God.

This woman was met by Jesus where she was. Jesus never failed and Jesus never fails to meet people where they are, exactly how and who they are. To Jesus, no one is a lost cause; no one is expendable. The woman bent by life's burdens for so long was, during that brief encounter, the most important person in Jesus' life, an experience that is profoundly comforting. Comforting to us, for there are times when we are that woman, that man, that youth who know that we need the touch of Jesus upon our lives to convert us, to change us, to free us, to forgive us.

The promise of and the touch of Jesus is not only comforting, when we are encountered by Jesus there is always a challenge. In our death-denying society many of us are fearful of anything in life that bring us low and weigh us down with sorrow and memories. Too often, when we know someone who has been hurt or in pain we try and hurry them through their pain and grief, as much for our own comfort as for theirs. But this is not Jesus' way. Jesus doesn't ask the bent woman to straighten up her act or to get over herself before she comes seeking his touch. He throws caution to the wind and makes her needs the priority of the moment.

As followers of this Jesus this is our calling as we connect with other people in their need and pain. Yes, you are right, I know, being with someone who is in pain is uncomfortable. As we listen to their story, as we share their discomfort, as we face our own inability to make them whole again. Let me assure you that, yes, even we pastors feel helpless in the face of inner or outer wounds that cannot be bandaged or easily healed, but Jesus invites us to stay in that uncomfortable place. This is where

human suffering and the love of Jesus meet, and while it may be messy, it is holy ground, to be honored above all else. For in such moments and encounters, God's wild mercy works life and offers love in the lives of those who are in deepest need.

My friends, as people of faith, as the church of Jesus Christ here at Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church you are welcomed and embraced by the wildness of God's mercy – all of you – all of you – all of you. The God who encounters us is the God of mercy, the God of a wide, wild mercy. By this God we are loved all the way, we are forgiven, we are freed, we are freed to see and serve and follow Jesus Christ. Having been so welcomed and embraced – your purpose, our purpose, with and for our Lord is to share and offer the wildness of God's mercy with and for each other, with and for your neighbors, now and always.

Sure there are times and occasions when all of us we feel that GOD can't use us in God's work, but if and when you are ever tempted to fall into accepting such a thought, such a limitation, just remember:

Noah was a drunk,                    Abraham was too old,  
Isaac was a daydreamer,            Jacob was a liar,  
Leah was ugly,                        Joseph was abused,  
Moses had a stutter                  Gideon was afraid,  
Rahab was a prostitute              Samson had long hair and was a womanizer,  
Jeremiah and Timothy were too young,  
David had an affair and was a murderer,  
Elijah was suicidal,  
Isaiah preached naked,            Jonah ran from God,  
Naomi was a widow,                Job went bankrupt,  
John the Baptist ate bugs,        Peter denied Christ,  
The Disciples fell asleep while praying,  
Martha worried about everything.  
Zaccheus was too small,  
The Samaritan woman was divorced, more than once,  
Paul was too religious,  
Timothy had an ulcer...  
AND Lazarus was dead!

The wildness of God's mercy was enough and more for all of these folks, and for people of every shape and stripe, and the good news is this, the wildness of God's mercy is enough for all of us in Rock Hill and beyond. Can you see it? Can you feel it? Can you sense it? Can you taste it? The wildness of God's mercy, the amazing grace of God's love, for YOU! To be welcomed and received in faith, to be shared and lived, to be multiplied as we offer it to other people.

Through you, Jesus continues to connect with the people who lack love or need help.  
Through your words and actions, Jesus restores those who are bent over.  
As we live the correct priorities, the converting love of Jesus will flood the lives of other people.  
The choices you make cause other people to consider their own choices.  
The example you set you models the life of faith to all those around you.  
The life you live at home, at work, in school, in the neighborhood, at church is what will point people to the hope, the peace, the love that we can all discover in the wild mercy of our Savior.

God does not want to hear any more excuses, God asks you to live to your full potential. It is a good thing that none of us are the message, you and me, we are just the messengers. In the gracious welcome and embrace of our Gracious God we are receiving the wildness of God's mercy and we go to allow this mercy to be offered and shared and experienced by other people everywhere. There is a wildness, there is a wildness in God's mercy. People of God, you matter, you belong, you are embraced even in your brokenness and now, forever changed you are to go and share and offer the widest, wildest expression of God's mercy to and with and for all people everywhere. Amen.