

March 22nd, 2026

John 8:2-11 “Mercy Isn’t Easy”

I’ve been on a news “brown out” for a couple of weeks now. Spring is generally the busiest time of the year in the church, and this year is no exception. I’ve needed to focus my attention on a lot of different things – extra services, an upcoming capital campaign, regional responsibilities, camps, and a variety of plumbing disasters. All of these things require an uncluttered brain. I don’t need to be bombarded and bogged down by all of the world’s problems when I’m having a hard enough time just keeping up with my own. Still, what I’m hearing in those brief five-minute clips on NPR news doesn’t sound very good. And yet, our theme for Lent this year is, “Tell Me Something Good.” And believe me—I’ve been trying.

We’ve been talking about the good news and how it catches us by surprise, and how it shows up in unexpected places. We’ve followed Jesus around Galilee—crashing a wedding party, sharing a meal with a woman whose audacious hospitality raised a few eyebrows, feeding five thousand with just five loaves and two fish, inviting children to come to him for a blessing even though they’re supposed to be “seen and not heard.” And now today, we find him showing an extraordinary amount of grace and mercy to a woman caught in adultery. Clearly, Jesus is in the mercy business. I’m just not so sure about the rest of the world.

I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I say that mercy is inconvenient. Rarely is it ever merited. Mercy isn’t something that’s earned—it’s something that’s given. And mercy isn’t easy. It goes against our gut instincts. And yet, Jesus—and so many others in scripture—keep lifting up mercy and forgiveness as *essential* to understanding the character and morals of God. In Matthew 18, he tells his disciples, much to their irritation, that they must forgive their enemies not seven times as the law requires, but “seventy times seven.” He calls the merciful blessed in the Beatitudes. And then there are his words as he is dying—on a cross,

surrounded by criminals, his grieving mother, and the very crowd that put him there: “Father, forgive them... they know not what they do.”

In today’s story from John’s gospel, Jesus embodies that mercy with a woman who, I suspect, has received very little of it in her life. But maybe that’s just my own protective instincts talking. It’s entirely possible she doesn’t deserve what Jesus is offering her. I mean, being caught in adultery is no small thing. And yet—mercy, unmerited, inadvisably offered, and brimming with foolish hope—seems to be exactly the kind of thing that identifies a person as a Christ-follower. At least it should.

It’s not that I think practicing mercy is easy. In fact, I doubt Jesus would talk about it so much if it were. God has a way of repeating what we struggle to hear. No—mercy is brutal. Mercy is what we ask for when we’ve messed up *so* badly—in our relationships, our marriages, our parenting, our friendships—that something in us starts to feel like it’s dying. Maybe it’s the relationship. Maybe it’s the version of ourselves we thought we were.

Maybe that’s the kind of death this woman had already experienced. Maybe the anger of the crowd was, in part, their own pain—watching something sacred unravel. Maybe she had been living in a death-dealing situation and was simply trying to find a way out. And still—how dare she receive... mercy? It doesn’t make sense. It isn’t logical. It isn’t fair. It doesn’t benefit everyone equally. It won’t make you money. It won’t make you look good. But mercy... is what makes us God’s own.

And the giving and receiving of mercy—in the most unlikely, most undeserving, most painful places—is one of the ways I know God is still at work in this world. Mercy is a way of hoping... and knowing... that there is more than the thing that hurts us. More than the thing that haunts us. More than the worst thing we’ve done—or the worst thing that’s been done to us. This is also why mercy is part of God’s justice.

Because God’s justice is not about punishment—it’s about restoration. God’s justice looks like a lost sheep being found. A coin recovered. A life restored. God’s goodness is not retributive. God’s goodness is generative—bringing life in the very places we expect death. Which is, perhaps, why Jesus says to her: Go. Sin no more. And live.

So here are some questions to carry with you this week—

What do you think Jesus is writing in the dust? Why does that detail matter? Is he writing the sins of the accusers, as some commentators suggest? Is it a message meant only for her? Is it the law itself? Or is he just... buying time in an impossibly tense moment?

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, in her book *Jesus for Everyone*, points out that the word used for “test” in this passage is the same word we hear in the Lord’s Prayer—“Lead us not into temptation”—and in the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. She reminds us that this story isn’t just about forgiveness—it’s also about the Pharisees setting up a legal trap for Jesus to make him look bad. If Jesus says, “Go ahead and stone her,” he risks violating the law because of an incomplete legal process. If he refuses, he could be accused of dismissing the law altogether. And if he authorizes an execution, he risks running afoul of Roman authority, which prohibited it. So what were they really hoping for? Was this ever about the woman at all? Or was Jesus the one on trial from the very beginning? There’s no mention of the woman’s husband. No real details about what happened. So we’re left to wonder— Was she coerced? Threatened? Set up? Is this story really about adultery... or is it about power?

And as you leave here today, I want to give something to carry with you this week— Just one question: **Where is mercy most difficult for *me* right now?** Maybe it’s a person. Maybe it’s a wound that won’t let go. Maybe it’s a situation you keep replaying in your mind. Maybe... it’s yourself. Don’t rush to answer it. Just notice what rises up when you ask it. Notice the resistance. Notice the anger. Notice the grief. Notice the

instinct to reach for a stone. And then—if you can— Picture that place.
Picture that person. That hurt. That failure. And set it down... in the
dust. Right there in front of Jesus.

The same place where this woman once stood.
The same place where the crowd slowly walked away.
The same place where no stones were thrown.
And then just... pay attention.
To what he might be writing there.
Not to condemn you.
Not to shame you.
But maybe—just maybe—
to remind you...
that mercy is still possible.
Even there.
Even *now*.