

## MERCY UNDER FIRE

Luke 22:49-51

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TEXT: Luke 22:51 "But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him."  
PURPOSE: To encourage our awareness of the mercy we have received, and to encourage our willingness to extend mercy to others, through the story of the slave who was wounded and healed during Jesus' arrest.

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*DEACON:* During the season of Lent, Pastor Keller is presenting dramatic portrayals of characters in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion about whom we know very little, but who likely became disciples following his resurrection. The character he will portray today is known as "the slave of the high priest," whom the gospel writer John knows by the name of Malchus (John 18:10). Malchus was with those whom Judas led to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke describes the encounter between Jesus and Malchus this way:

"When those around him saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord, should we strike with the sword?' Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him."

Pastor Keller will speak as Malchus.

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The first thing I want to say is, that night, the night they arrested Jesus, I didn't care. I really didn't care whether we got him or not, or what happened to him. What I cared about was that I'd just spent the whole day first preparing the Passover feast for the high priest and his guests, then serving it, then cleaning up while everyone sat around the table. Don't get me wrong: I didn't resent working for the high priest, even as his slave. Work was hard to come by in those days, and slavery was not such a terrible thing. I had a family; we had a small apartment in the high priest's compound; we had food on our table every day, and we were all treated kindly. Besides, my job was more like a personal attendant to the high priest, one who made sure that his wishes, from organizing his Passover feasts to seeing that his opponents were neutralized, were carried out.

I'd missed Passover with my own family; I always did. They were used to it. But I was looking forward to getting back home before my children went to bed. Toward the end of the meal, the high priest pulled me aside, and even before he spoke, I realized it was going to be a long night. "We're sending a detachment

of the Temple Police to pick up this Jesus fellow,” he whispered to me. “I want you to go along to make sure things are done properly.” So off I went, unarmed, unsure of how this little expedition was going to turn out, but worried that the police would look for an opportunity to draw some rebel blood. Out there in the dark garden, I watched as the man called Judas, who was leading us, identified Jesus by kissing him. I was allowing myself to wonder what motivated him to betray the leader of his little band when, from out of nowhere, I saw the glint of a sword coming toward my head. I have no idea how I managed to dodge it, but all of a sudden, I felt a terrible pain on the side of my head. I put my hand to the pain, and blood was gushing from where my ear had been. I almost blacked out from the shock. But at the same time, I thought, here we go, this is just the excuse the police need to start swinging their swords.

Then, I heard this voice, so amazingly full of authority. “No more of this!” I managed to see that it was Jesus, not the captain of the guard, who had given the order. Then, he came over to me, and he looked me right in the eye. I was terrified, but just having him look at me steadied me. I saw kindness, and strength, and composure in his eyes. His gaze filled me with a peace that I’d never felt before. Then he reached down and found my ear on the ground. I distinctly recall him brushing it off, then holding it up to my head, and all of a sudden, the pain was gone. I put my hand to it and realized that he had reattached my ear. “Mercy,” I thought. “Here he is, his life in danger, one of his friends trying to protect him, and he is showing me, someone among those out to get him, incredible mercy. What kind of person shows such mercy when there’s no mercy for him?”

I don’t even know if anyone else had seen what Jesus had done for me. Everything moved so quickly. I was still reeling from what had happened to me, so I was more or less carried along by the events. Back at the high priest’s house, I went to our apartment and changed my clothes, and there it was, blood, dried on the right shoulder of my tunic, proof that I really had been wounded. As I watched the priests and the other elders develop their strategy for doing away with Jesus and making it look like they were saving our country from a rebel, I kept touching my ear, wondering why anyone thought this man was such a threat. Slowly it dawned on me that he was a threat to the power and privilege of the whole priestly collusion with Rome. If people realized that the priests were in it

for themselves, and not for the people, as Jesus obviously was, that the whole system would crumble. And as I realized this, my own world began to crumble. My life definitely benefitted from things being the way they were, but here was this man who had shown me mercy, whose look had filled me with a peace which had stayed with me, just as my ear stayed with me. What was I supposed to think? What was I supposed to do?

The next big festival in the Jewish calendar was Pentecost, seven weeks after Passover. Once again, the high priest hosted some huge banquets, and once again, my fellow servants and I were kept mightily busy. The morning of the day for the biggest celebration, I went out to buy some things we needed for the banquet that night. A crowd was gathered, and I tried to push my way through it. But then I heard one strong voice speaking with great conviction, and I heard voices in the crowd, speaking languages I didn't understand, but the speakers obviously were understanding the strong voice, who was speaking my language, Aramaic. Everyone in the crowd thought he was speaking in their own language as well. I looked toward the strong voice, and there, standing with him, was the man who had cut off my ear. I was so glad that I was hidden in the crowd. But I stopped to listen, and I heard the story of Jesus, for the first time, from Jesus' own followers, and not from the priests. It amazed me. It stirred that same peace in me that I'd felt the night Jesus showed me mercy. When the speaker said, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified," I became a believer. (Acts 2:36)

I didn't get baptized that day; I knew I'd be in trouble if I didn't have the banquet ready. But a few days later, I found some of his followers, and I told them I had been there on Pentecost, and I asked them to baptize me, which they did. What I didn't do was tell them who I was, who I worked for. They didn't ask, and at that point, I didn't want to tell. They did tell me how to get to the places where the followers were meeting, and from then on, as often as I safely could, I went to the meetings.

It was at one of those meetings that I saw him, the one who had sliced off my ear. He was speaking that night. The leaders moved from meeting place to meeting place, and kept the scattered small groups connected to each other and to

the true stories about Jesus. Already, there were all sorts of spinoff groups and crazy legends springing up. As I listened to him, a fear welled up from inside me. What if he recognized me? The followers weren't exactly a secret society, but for good reason, they didn't want to call attention to themselves, and they were worried about infiltrators. Wouldn't I be suspected of spying on the group?

In my anxiety, I touched my ear. It had become a bit of a habit. Only this touch brought a new determination. I had to go up to him, had to tell him what had happened to me because of what he had done to me. While I waited for the meeting to break up, my insides went back and forth between that amazing peace that still felt like it was coming from Jesus, and my worry that this was a very bad idea, that I was better off just being one of the followers.

I went up to him. "Hello," I said. "Thank you for your message tonight. I found it very inspiring." "You're welcome," he answered. "I'm glad there are people who want to hear about Jesus." I stood there saying nothing for what seemed like an awkwardly long time. Finally, the words came out. "Do you recognize me?" I asked. "No, I don't think I do. Have we met?" "Yes, we have," I answered. "But it was only for a moment. I was there. In the garden." He looked at me more carefully. "You . . . you were the one I . . ." He choked up. I could see he was more afraid of me than I was of him. "Yes, I was," I said. I waited again, not sure what should happen next. "I, uh, I'm sorry," he said. "I never talk about that. What I did was against everything he stood for. I always wanted what I did just to go away, to be forgotten."

"Well," I said, "here's what happened to me because of what you did." And I told him my story, told him how I had become a follower. I told him how I still was the high priest's slave, so I had to be careful about my loyalties, but also that I could not deny what Jesus had done for me, not just with my ear, but with my soul. "So," I said, "I am here to thank you. Or to forgive you. Actually, I forgave you the moment he looked at me. When his mercy overtook me. I never resented you, not even before I was a full believer. He never gave me a chance to hold anything against you. I guess I could say I am who I am now because of your swordsmanship." "Fortunately for you and for me, I was never good with a sword. And now," said, "you are showing the same mercy to me that he showed to you." "Am I?" "All this time I have carried this burden, this secret, that I

betrayed him, not like Judas did, but in my own way. I betrayed what he stood for, his way that releases spiritual power through human weakness. I almost destroyed everything, and I've never really dealt with it. But now, here you are, showing me that he even knew how to use my act of violence to bring peace, peace to you, and peace to me."

We embraced. He asked my name. I asked his. He said, "You've given me a new piece of the story to tell. I promise: what I did to you that night, and the mercy that came to you and to me from it, will never be left out of the story."