

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
June 7, 2026, Pentecost + 2

Rev. Pauline Farrington
Trinity, North Bethesda

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

18 While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." 19 And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. 20 Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, 21 for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." 22 Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that moment. 23 When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, 24 he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. 25 But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. 26 And the report of this spread through all of that district.

Also referenced: Romans 4:13-25

Not long after I first entered
the process of candidacy
for pastoral ministry,
my daughter, Claudia,
was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia.
For the first six months of my candidacy,
I was doing all the required forms and essays
and going to interviews
from her hospital room.
Six months after her diagnosis
of that cruel disease
and it's brutal treatment,
Claudia died.
She was 18 years old.

I received some very wise advice
from the dean of admissions
to Lutheran Southern Theological Seminary —

to wait one year
 before starting
 the hard and heavy work of seminary.

It was good advice.

So a year and a half after she died,
 I began my pastoral formation
 in parallel with my journey of
 profound grief.

I tell you all this because

this gospel story was one
 that came to mean a lot to me
 and, at first,
 not in a good way.

In the first two years of course work,
 pastoral candidates are required
 to do field work in a congregation.

So classes all week,
 then on Sundays the students work
 in a local congregation
 alongside a supervising pastor.

Over the course of those two years,
 I did all the Sunday-morning things
 a pastor does
 except preside at the table.

In the second semester of my first year,
 I was required to preach a few times.

I had a wonderful supervisor,

Pastor Beth Birkholz.

She's authentic and down-to-earth.

We connected easily.

When we looked at upcoming gospel texts
 to decide which Sundays I would preach,
 this story was one of the texts.

I could be honest with Pr. Beth
 and I told her that I didn't like it —
 that, in fact, I had a hard time
 with *all* the miracle stories,
 but particularly this one.

Claudia had a rare blood disease

and she had hemorrhaging
 during her treatments
 that had to be managed
 with strong hormones.

I didn't want to hear about
 hemorrhaging women being healed
 and daughters being revived.

And I certainly didn't want to preach about them.

Pastor Beth was compassionate and understanding.

Of course she didn't ask me to preach that Sunday.

But she did say, "You know, Pauline,

Jesus healed that woman

and raised that little girl,

but he didn't heal

every suffering person he saw.

And the ones he did heal —

they eventually died.

The little girl eventually died again.

For some reason,

her bold, honest,

compassionate rationality

helped me.

I couldn't explain, at the time,

why it helped,

but it did.

Here's what I think now.

All those stories of healing

and the dead being raised

are about hope.

Hope in hopeless circumstances.

They were meant to instill hope

in a people living

under a brutal occupying regime.

They were intended to

kindle hope in people

living by cruel, communal rules and taboos

that excluded and dehumanized them.

Tax collectors were considered traitors
 to the Judean people —
 collaborators with Rome,
 collecting unfair
 and exorbitant taxes
 that benefited only their tormentors.

Jesus walked right up to Matthew
 and invited him to be his disciple,
 to walk alongside him,
 to be in close communion with him.

Jesus went to a dinner party
 filled with “tax collectors and sinners” —
 people not only shunned
 but reviled,
 people whose communities
 and even families had rejected them.

Jesus entered into community with *those* people.
 He gave them back the worth
 they were born with.
 And in doing that,
 he demonstrated God’s desire
 for mercy above all rules and taboos.

God’s mercy was then extended to a child
 who was *dead*.
 She was cut off from her parents
 and community,
 cut off from life itself.
 He held her hand,
 raised her up,
 and restored her to her family.
 He gave her back
 the life she had lost.

And that mercy flowed to a woman
 who had suffered incurable bleeding
 for many years.
 Illness or disease of any kind in that culture
 was cause for ostracism —
 but a woman bleeding

carried a particular kind of
 expulsion and shame.
 Jesus not only made her well,
 he called her "Daughter" —
 gave her back her identity
 and restored the dignity
 she had been denied for so long.

Jesus embodied God's desire
 for mercy and hope
 even when things are beyond hope.
 That's what mercy *does*.

Abraham believed God's promises,
 and "hoping against hope,
 he believed that he would
 become 'the father of many nations'".

Hoping against hope,
 the synagogue leader sought Jesus out and,
 believing Jesus could help,
 asked him to come
 and touch his daughter with mercy.

Hoping against hope,
 the bleeding woman dared
 to get down on the ground
 and reach out her arm
 to the fringe of his cloak
 believing in the mercy
 that would flow out from him
 and that she would be made well.

When I lost my Claudia,
 I found myself surprised
 that a person doesn't die
 from a heart ripped apart
 by that kind of sorrow.
 I had no hope for joy ever again.
 I couldn't find reason to hope for anything,

knowing that a mother's worst nightmare
 can come true.
 And yet, little by little,
 against all hope,
 God's mercy flowed
 into my ragged heart.
 I learned that sorrow and joy
 can both exist
 in the compassionate hope
 that comes in Christ.

Yesterday our Metropolitan DC synod
 spent the day together in assembly.
 The theme of the day was "Hope Alone."
 The whole conversation,
 all the business conducted,
 was rooted in and approached with hope.

We had a representative from our
 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America —
 our national church body —
 Rev. Khader El-Yateem.
 Pastor El-Yateem is originally from Bethlehem.
 His mother and sister still live there.
 He is an Arab, a Palestinian,
 a Christian, a Lutheran, a child of God
 serving with our ELCA.
 He told us *much* about the hopeless circumstances
 of the Palestinian people —
 what they endure
 under the occupation
 of the Israeli government,
 military, and settlers.

He told us that for Palestinian Christians
 "hope is what we *do*."
 It's a Hope
 that does not deny reality.
 It's a hope that is born
 in the shadow of the cross.
 It's a hope that understands that
 resurrection doesn't erase suffering.

And it's a hope that acts as defiance
against all that would
render us hopeless.

Sometimes all we have is Hope Alone.

Hope when there seems to be no hope at all.

Maybe that's the greatest mercy of all.

Maybe that's what salvation really is.