

“Authority to Forgive”

Mark 2:1-12

19 February 2006

The 7th Sunday After the Epiphany

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Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he said to the paralytic— ¹¹“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” ¹²And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Prayer.

Our Gospel lesson for today certainly captures the imagination. If you are like me, memories of this passage take me back to my early Sunday school years, in Skip Lynn’s and Herb Larson’s classroom. Felt board cutout figures made the narrative come alive.

Even as third and fourth graders, we could use our developing imagination and understand the tremendous faith that must have been necessary for the friends of a man who is paralyzed to carry him on a mat to Jesus’ house, hoist him to the roof, tear a hole through which they could pass him down, and, finally, to lower him into the Savior’s presence into the crowd below.

Back when I was active as a volunteer medic on the ambulance, it was an everyday occurrence to extract someone from some place challenging. We used a device called a “Reeve’s Sleeve.” It was made of high strength, reinforced vinyl and Velcro. At a scene we would unroll it, slide a wooden backboard into it - like an arm into a sleeve. The sleeve had sewn to it large Velcro flaps which could be completely wrapped around an individual’s legs, pelvis, torso, and arms; completely immobilizing the person. Together with additional tie down straps and

carrying handles, the “Reeve’s Sleeve” is quite a handy piece of equipment.

We often practiced on one another, combining training with the rest of the fire department. I remember being put up on a roof of a local school and acting as if I was having a heart attack. The medics got the sleeve assembled and me properly on it. Being completely immobilized (and afraid of heights, I might add), they used the winch from the ladder truck to hoist me up, all 300 plus pounds of me, swing me over the edge, and lower me to the ground.

It is humbling to feel like you are tied up and unable to help yourself, like a stuffed Thanksgiving turkey ready to go in the oven. I can’t even begin to imagine how it must have felt to have been the paralyzed man in our Gospel narrative; hoisted to the roof and let down on a mat. On a woven mat! O my gracious! It is a wonder he was killed.

The actions of the paralyzed man and his friends were an incredible act of faith. They point to his deeply rooted determination to be healed; to be set free from his ataxic, immobile body; to be made whole once again. His faith was much larger than a mustard seed. It was big enough to partially destroy a house. Certainly, its witness has served Christ and his kingdom well for the past two thousand years.

I must admit, however, that this display of grand and bold faith does cause me to have second thoughts. I know that my faith wouldn’t compare. Most of us cite the mustard seed and find justifying comfort in its smallness. That is where most of us truly live our faith experience. Of course Jesus would heal a man let down through a roof; but what about me? You ask.

One of the amazing characteristics of God’s grace isn’t captured by individual acts of miraculous healing. At most, these acts of Jesus solve the problem only for the single person Jesus healed, and perhaps their family. Without a doubt, the Gospel gains additional traction through the witness that is served by the healing stories. After all, this story has survived two thousand years, canonization, editing, translation, cultural relativism, and has landed in the pulpit of the West Walworth United Methodist Church. But there is more.

The amazing nature of God’s grace is only made complete with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This propagates the healing nature of atonement and eternal life, from one isolated individual of great faith, to all of humanity, where each one of us struggle with faith even the size of a mustard seed.

It is important to make a second observation about this wonderful Gospel narrative. Jesus is in his home, his own home (it says), crowded in with throngs of followers and religious authorities. A hole is ripped open in the roof to his house, and down through the hole is lowered a man on a mat. He sees this extraordinary act of faith and ... does what? The fifth verse from the text reads,

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”” Jesus’ initial response is to forgive the man of his sins, not to heal him. This is what gets Jesus into hot water; not the fact that he healed this man of his paralysis, rather, the fact that he forgave him of his sins.

The scribes, religious authorities that were stewards of scripture and its interpretation respond by saying, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Verse 7). There are two problems here. First, the paralyzed man’s disability is linked with sin. Secondly, there is the question of who forgives sin.

It is quite clear that the gospel author is not intentionally making a connection between sin and infirmity. However, this indirect inference has been made through the ages, and it has not been helpful for Christianity. Jesus is asked repeatedly and throughout the synoptic Gospels, “who sinned that caused this man to be the handicapped wretch that he is?”

Sin does not lead to punitive medical punishment by an angry god.

Sin does drive a wedge in our relationship with God. It attempts to separate us from God and His grace. It become our own arrogance and stubborn will that drives us to make bad decisions; that causes us to choose darkness and gnashing of teeth instead of an eternal banquet and a royal wedding feast. God does not so much as open the doorway to hell, as we are eager to open it ourself and walk through it on our own accord.

What heals this paralytic in today’s Gospel is the same thing that heals everyone else that Jesus encounters. “My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go and sin no more.” “My son, your faith has made you well. Go and present yourself to the temple priests, wash yourself, and be made clean.”

Faith heals this man. The same faith that hoisted him to the roof, tore a hole in it, and lowered him down in the midst of a crowd is the same faith that allowed him to take up his mat and to walk out the front door a healed man.

Jesus has and demonstrates the power to forgive sins. Hindsight has given us the proper theological lens through which understanding is quite obvious, even though it wasn’t to the disciples, scribes, or crowds at that time. Jesus is not only the Son of God, Jesus is God, the Divine, one and the same as the Father and Holy Spirit, according to classical Trinitarian doctrine.

“Who can forgive sins but God alone?” the scribes ask in the seventh verse.

Exactly. Jesus can forgive sins. God alone can forgive sins. “Let me see; two plus two does equal four!” Rocket science or brain surgery this isn’t; but to those in attendance what wasn’t immediately clear to them was certainly made clear after the fact – after Jesus rose from the dead and the Gospel witness was

catapulted throughout the known world. Through the ages the Church has rightly cited this passage, as well as many others, to outline the argument supporting the divinity of Christ.

I would make a third and final observation about our Gospel lesson for today. Sometimes, Jesus' greatest problem is his closest friends.¹

Jesus was surrounded by a crowd of family, friends, disciples, religious authorities, all of which served as an effective barrier to keep out those who needed him the most. Yes, it is great that Jesus draws a crowd. But, let us not forget that this is the same crowd that would eventually be the ones who would be shouting, "Crucify him!"

What does this tell us about those of us who, on this Sabbath day, assemble and crowd around Jesus? As William Willimon so rightly asks, "is there a sense in which we who love Jesus may be one of Jesus' greatest limitations?"

We've come out on this cold February Sunday to crowd around the feet of Jesus. Some of us are dedicated Biblical scholars, much like the scribes were. Some of us have been doing this all our lives; we have a lot of religious experience. Most of us crowd in to get our weekly fix of Jesus, restore our spiritual batteries, and to be forgiven - just to return to our semi-private world of sloth, gluttony, and selfishness.

Mark reports that it was a crowd of good, full-time religious, theologically informed, dedicated people – people just like you and me – who quite unintentionally kept a person in need from getting in to Jesus. Outside the house is a paralyzed man in desperate need to get to Jesus.

As an ordained pastor, entrusted with the stewardship of the Church, there is nothing more painful than to make the observation that the primary reason that people report for not following Jesus, for not embracing the Christian faith, is us, is the Church. They can't get to Jesus. They can't hear what he is saying. They can't see the beauty of his ways. All because of us.

Thank God the narrative doesn't end here. The crowd *nearly* defeated the paralyzed man and his friends, but not quite. They got onto the roof and hacked a hole in the ceiling. You can almost imagine everyone in the crowd is looking up, staring at the unfolding spectacle with their mouths wide open in disbelief! Now I ask you, whose got the faith?

Jesus doesn't care about the roof. Buildings can always be fixed. Anyone can repair a roof. Jesus came to heal the sick, forgive sins, and to raise the dead!

Every last member of the crowd responded. Mark writes, "they were *all* amazed

¹ Willimon, W. H., "Followers Hinder Jesus," *Pulpit Resources*, February 19, 2006, Logos Productions, Inc. Inver Grove Heights, MN, 34 (1) 33-36.

and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” (verse 12).

Indeed, we’ve never seen anything like this, either. We’ve never seen a Savior who pushes away the religious to reach out to the lost. We’ve never known a Lord who takes delight in having his home wrecked and roof cut up so that people in need can have equal access to him. We’ve never experienced a Messiah who has reached beyond the bounds of the saved in order to touch the lost. We’ve never seen a teacher who has demanded that his best students moved away from him to let those in greater need gather around him. We’ve never seen anything like this here at Zion, or anyplace else!

If you are desperate or in need, this is truly Good News that is being proclaimed this morning. If you are paralyzed or stuck in the mire of sin, let what faith you have run free. Go ahead and knock a hole in Jesus’ roof. Kick it in and let yourself down to where Jesus is. Don’t let those of us in the crowd keep you out.

Go ahead and let Jesus touch you. He will make you perfect and whole again.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.