

THROUGH THE ROOF

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 Mark 2:1-12, NT p. 36

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The Gospel of Mark has been the focus of this church year, with some readings from John and occasionally Luke. Mark is the shortest Gospel, likely the first to be written down. Each Gospel has its own themes, within the stories of Jesus and the disciples. One of Mark's themes is the question, "Who **is** Jesus?" The demons seem to know, and the soldier at the foot of the cross, but the religious leaders don't get it, and most of the time, the disciples are clueless, too.

In today's Gospel reading, it's the religious leaders who ask the question, in a healing story from the second chapter of Mark. Listen now to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Mark 2:1-12.

Through the roof. That's how they brought their friend to Jesus. Whatever it took, they were determined to get him there. Jesus was in that tiny room with as many people as could crowd in – three or four disciples, a few religious leaders, and whoever else got there first. Many more were pressed against the doorway. A small group carrying a paralyzed man couldn't get anywhere near the door. I wonder what the man on the mat thought. Was he incredibly disappointed not to see Jesus? Was he resigned to staying forever paralyzed? Did he tell his friends, "Don't make a fuss. I'll be OK." Maybe he said, "See? What did I tell you? I knew no one would pay attention to someone like me."

But his friends, or brothers or cousins – these four who believed he was worth it – they wouldn't take "no" for an answer. A big crowd and a tiny doorway couldn't keep them from getting him to Jesus. They went to a creative Plan B. Up the outside steps to the roof, they carried their friend, and began to dig through the mud and thatch. What a mess they must have made inside! Dried flakes of mud and straw falling into Jesus' hair. Flies buzzing around, and even dead bugs falling out of the roof. Yuck! A sudden beam of sunlight broke through, immediately blocked by a mat with a heavy load. (What do you think the paralyzed man was thinking then?) Whoever was in the way down below had to scramble as he was lowered into the room. Four eager faces peered down through the ragged hole. Jesus looked up at them, and at the man scrunched up on the floor. What must have flashed through Jesus' mind? Do you supposed he had to suppress a chuckle? Or wonder who was going to repair the damage? You know, this could have been Peter's mother-in-law's house.

Whatever else he might have thought, Jesus "**saw their faith.**" He saw the creative determination of the friends, and he named it "faith." I wonder how often my faith in God is expressed as creative determination. I express my faith through prayer and music, in public worship and private writing, and some volunteer work. I know you express your faith in prayer, in works of kindness, like food and phone calls and building houses with Habitat for Humanity. We all know of people who express their faith by the way they do their daily work. But how often do we go to that creative Plan B, that new way to share our faith that takes some determination on our part? Not often enough, I think.

Plan B often presents some challenges. Sometimes people who could be involved just stay where they are, better roadblocks than helpers. Maybe they're thinking of themselves, like those in the crowd who just wanted to hear Jesus without interruption. Getting our own needs met, staying comfortable, not wanting to cause problems, can get in the way of our making any extra effort to share God's love.

Sometimes the roadblock is a simple lack of attention. People don't turn around to look at those in need outside the door, in the back of the crowd. If certain village leaders had seen this paralyzed man, they might have directed the crowd to make room for him to come through to Jesus. But if they never turned around, they

would have had no idea that he was there. Like the people in need in our community, maybe. The ones without shelter from the heat or cold; teenagers trying to stay in school, but without a safe family; or people in need of a reliable friend. And so we miss the opportunity to share God's love.

Lack of imagination and insistence on proper procedure can be significant roadblocks. If those four friends had had to submit a line-item budget for roof destruction and repair, if they had been required to prove that the project was likely to have a positive outcome and then apply for 501(c)(3) status, even these determined folks might have turned away discouraged.

The need to be in control is another roadblock. The scribes were keeping their eyes on Jesus, and not in a good way. They had to be sure he wasn't doing anything that would lead people to question their authority to teach the law of Moses. That can happen in churches, too. "We've never done it that way before" can signal a lack of imagination, a fear of trying something new, or a self-centered need for comfort or control, and all of these get in the way of creative new efforts for bringing people to Jesus. Those attitudes kept the people of Capernaum from understanding the new thing that God was even then doing in Jesus.

But the four friends got it! They broke open the roof, made a mess, got their friend to Jesus – and he pronounced it "faith."

Then, in that tiny house in Capernaum, the paralyzed man found himself in front of Jesus, and in the middle of a theological argument. The first thing Jesus said to the paralyzed man was, "Son, your sins are forgiven." The religious leaders immediately went on high alert. "Your sins are forgiven?" What kind of healing is that? And how dare Jesus forgive sins? That kind of forgiveness is reserved for God alone. Jesus had stepped over the line. Healing was OK with them, as long as it wasn't on the Sabbath. Teaching was fine, as long as he didn't say anything against the law of Moses. Even casting out a demon or two was probably good for the whole town. But now Jesus had gone too far. Forgiving sins! You've got to be kidding! He was claiming to have the authority to do a "God-thing." Within their own minds, the scribes began to accuse him of blasphemy – setting himself up as God.

Of course, that is one of the reasons that Mark tells this story. It is more than a healing story. It is a story of God's forgiveness coming through Jesus of Nazareth, that answers the question "Who is Jesus?" The one who soon would be revealed as Messiah, Son of God.

Jesus answered the scribes' unspoken questions. "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," – he said to the paralytic – "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

And he did. The power of God in Jesus of Nazareth brought both forgiveness and healing to this man. The crowd was amazed, and I assume that all those people who hadn't let him into the house, then moved aside to let him walk out.

So, which of these people in the story is most like you?

I wonder if we are sometimes the scribes. We Presbyterians are known for wanting things done "decently and in order." That's Biblical, you know, a quote from one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. (1 Cor. 14:40) But often we take it to extremes. Then we get stuck in our own way of doing things, which of course must be right, because we've "always" done it that way. Maybe the virus shook us out of that mindset at least a little, so that we could welcome people in the creative way called Zoom.

Or maybe we are part of the crowd, who without thinking, can get in the way of people who want to come to God. It seems it would have been easy enough for people to clear a path to the door for these folks who wanted to get their friend to Jesus. But the people in the crowd just stood there, evidently not paying attention to the one in need, and they did nothing to help. People who do nothing can be just as big a problem as those who are actively resistant. We are like that, sometimes. We assume that someone else will do the work, or that if our friends have a spiritual need, they'll say something, so we don't go out of our way to assure them of the love of God for them. We forget that we all need encouragement and prayer.

On the other hand, is it possible to be like the four friends who made an extra effort to get their friend to Jesus? Of course, it may not be necessary to make quite as big a mess as they did. But often we do need to make that second effort. We need to work together to share our faith, to encourage people who need that touch of God's life-giving power.

This congregation has many examples of times when you've done just that. The Prayers and Squares quilting group, when we could all tie a knot in a quilt as a sign of our prayers for someone facing serious illness. Cooking and serving at Community Meals. Establishing the Warming Center. Helping with Habitat for Humanity. A mission trip to Arizona. And I've missed some, I'm sure.

It's not as easy to work together when the pandemic kept us apart. Yet we can still be connected. We can listen carefully to those acquaintances who seem so different from us. We can tell that person with a problem that we are praying for them, and then really do it. And if there is a person that you don't like all that much, or someone you're having a problem with, what about praying for that person, and allow God to love and forgive you both? That's hard for me sometimes. The good news is that Jesus sees our efforts and recognizes our faith, and will do even more than we ask.

Well, maybe you don't see yourself as a stubborn religious leader, or as a do-nothing member of the crowd, or even as a faithful friend who can tear up the roof when necessary. Maybe in this story you are the one lying on the mat, paralyzed by events beyond your control, by your fears of the future or your memories of the past. The good news is that Jesus Christ has the authority to overcome whatever it is that has knocked you flat. He begins with forgiveness, which sets you right with God. Then he releases you from what holds you down, maybe very gradually, or maybe in a way that is a complete surprise. You may find yourself set free to do things you have never imagined. Or you may simply be set free to become God's new person right where you are.

The Good News is that through Jesus Christ, **God is for us**, and for whatever will bring new life to our world. May we be willing to receive and share God's amazing love.

Even if it means going through the roof? Maybe so!

Let us pray.

Loving, forgiving, challenging God, overcome all that holds us back from following you. May we have a new sense of spiritual freedom to live the good news of your love which we know in Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.