

“HEALING GRACE”

Mark 2:1-12

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There’s so much to think about in this story, so many surprising glimpses of grace, that it’s hard to decide what to look at first. But those friends! The paralyzed man and Jesus are obviously at the center of the story, but so much of the story rests on these four friends, and possibly some others who accompanied them. We all could use some friends like these: resourceful, persistent folks who show up for us, take time for us, want the best for us; who are willing to take some risks, break a few rules, be pushy if that’s what it takes to help us get what we need. It occurs to me that even if they hadn’t succeeded in getting their friend to Jesus, he’d *still* have experienced some amazing grace in that kind of friendship. Friendship like that is healing, grounding, hope-giving ... a real gift.

But I don’t get the sense that the friends saw it that way. They probably didn’t even realize that they themselves were demonstrating the love of God. They just wanted to bring their friend to someone they thought might heal him – to Jesus.

This story always makes me think of a quote from Henri Nouwen: “We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.” (Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*)

We shouldn’t hear that as suggesting that we don’t matter. On the contrary. God is the source of healing, grace, and power, but this story of the resourceful, persistent friends shines a light on the role we have to play in helping one another to a place where the healing grace of Christ can touch us.

I love that these friends accomplish this by making a hole in a roof! That little detail catches our attention because it’s so crazy and unexpected (you have to wonder what the homeowner, whoever that may have been, reacted to it!). But it’s a great reminder that there are all kinds of ways to help, to show love ... sometimes creativity is called for and sometimes the way into a place of grace is surprising and unexpected.

What happens next is even more surprising, though: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” What???! When he sees *their* faith, he forgives *his* sins?? Haven’t we always heard, and believed, and said that nobody else can have faith for you? Apparently, that’s not entirely true. It would seem that maybe these folks are “carrying” their friend in more ways than one. Could it be that for some reason – maybe physical suffering or maybe something else – he’s lost his grasp on faith? We can appreciate what that’s like can’t we? Many of us have had times like that. The grief of a loved one’s death

is overwhelming. A cherished plan came to nothing. Somebody you trusted let you down. Life feels like a struggle. The world seems headed for disaster. It feels like your prayers go unheard. If you've ever had a time when your faith seemed to desert you, you aren't alone. It looks like the man in our story may have shared that experience. And what was true for him is true for us, too, when we have a community of faith around us. When we can't lean on our own faith, we can lean on the faith of our community. In the church, we hold faith with and for each other, and when one of us can't pray or hope or even believe for a while the rest of us carry our friend. And if we hear this story, we know that Jesus sees. What an amazing bit of grace that is!

This story offers a startling contrast with our attachment to the idea – and the industry – of “self-help.” The unnamed man at the center of the story doesn't do a thing to get himself to Jesus. We don't know whether he wanted his friends to bring him or if he objected and they brought him anyway. Once he's dropped into Jesus' presence, he doesn't say anything or make any request. He doesn't seem to have any expectation and Jesus doesn't recognize any faith in him. And yet... there is no question about whether the grace that's present in Jesus is for him. He doesn't have to be strong, stay positive, focus on his goals, keep fighting, or do anything to be deserving of help. It's all grace. “Son, your sins are forgiven,” Jesus says.

And that comes as something of a surprise to us, too. What we expect is the physical healing. It seems obvious that's why the man's friends have brought him. The man is suffering. It hardly seems like the time to bring up *sin*. We're a bit troubled, also, to think that Jesus might be connecting the man's disability with his sins. But a lot of people at this time believed that physical ailments could be a form of punishment for sin. Maybe this man believed that, too, and maybe Jesus, sensing this, spoke to that spiritual need, to some sense of guilt that the man was burdened by. Jesus doesn't patronize him by assuming that as a disabled person he can't possibly have any sins worth worrying about. He speaks the word of grace that needs to be spoken.

The Pharisees – the most religious folks in the community – seize on Jesus' words of forgiveness as evidence that he's crossed a line into disrespect for God by claiming for himself a power – forgiveness – that only God has. They don't say this out loud so maybe they are surprised to find that Jesus reads their reaction accurately. I wonder if they were as surprised as we are by the way Jesus responds with an astute and profound question: “Which is harder, to say ‘your sins are forgiven’ or to say to a paralyzed man, ‘get up and walk’?” How can that question be answered? Obviously, one can *say* anything, but the question is about whether, and when, the words carry any power, any grace, any healing. Jesus himself answers the question in the most eloquent way possible: he turns to the man and tells him to get up, pick up the mat he was lying on, and go to his home. And the man gets up.

The Pharisees are right, it turns out. Jesus has claimed the power of healing and forgiveness – the power of God – as his own. But whereas the Pharisees (and with them many others, over the years) envisioned that power as withholding and demanding, Jesus exercises that power as grace. And he extends that grace to the whole person. We know now, don't we, that although

physical illness and disability aren't punishments, physical and spiritual wellness are deeply connected. Jesus seems to have known that. And the man who was paralyzed, maybe by guilt and fear as much as by his physical ailment, gets up and walks off home.

In the end, everyone – does this include the skeptics as well? – is amazed admits that they've never seen anything like it. And they all glorify God.

Probably nobody more than the man who was carried by his friends. We can hardly doubt that his life was changed beyond his imaginings. Do we want to tell a story about the amazing life he went on to have, the incredible things he accomplished, his leadership and influence in his community, the part he played in the Christian church as it came into being? We could tell that story, and some of it might be true. But the desire to tell that story reflects *our* preoccupations. It is equally likely that the man lived an ordinary life – planting vegetables, playing with his children, helping his neighbors – loving that ordinary life and giving thanks to God for it every night until he closed his eyes for the last time. Jesus didn't heal this man's body and spirit *in order for him to do extraordinary things*. Grace itself is the extraordinary thing that embraced that paralyzed man, and everyone there that day, and all those who've found themselves restored to wholeness in the presence of Jesus. Grace is enough.

Amen.