

Mark 2:1-12

Faith Journeys

The Faith of the Friends
The Faith of the Scribes
The Faith of the Paralytic
The Faith of the Crowd

Let me tell you a story found in the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 2, verses 1-12.

AND WHEN HE RETURNED TO CAPERNAUM AFTER SOME DAYS,
IT WAS REPORTED THAT HE WAS AT HOME.

AND MANY WERE GATHERED TOGETHER, SO THAT THERE WAS NO LONGER ROOM FOR THEM,
NOT EVEN ABOUT THE DOOR.
AND HE WAS PREACHING THE WORD TO THEM.

AND THEY CAME, BRINGING TO HIM A PARALYTIC CARRIED BY FOUR MEN. AND WHEN THEY
COULD NOT GET NEAR HIM BECAUSE OF THE CROWDS, THEY REMOVED THE ROOF ABOVE
HIM; AND WHEN THEY HAD MADE AN OPENING, THEY LET DOWN THE PALLET ON WHICH THE
PARALYTIC LAY.

AND WHEN JESUS SAW THEIR FAITH, HE SAID TO THE PARALYTIC,
“MY SON, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN.”

NOW SOME OF THE SCRIBES WERE SITTING THERE, QUESTIONING IN THEIR HEARTS,

“WHY DOES THIS MAN SPEAK LIKE THIS? IT IS BLASPHEMY! WHO CAN FORGIVE SINS BUT
GOD ALONE?”

AND IMMEDIATELY JESUS, PERCEIVING IN HIS SPIRIT THAT THEY WERE QUESTIONING
WITHIN THEMSELVES, SAID TO THEM,

“WHY DO YOU QUESTION LIKE THIS IN YOUR HEARTS? WHAT IS EASIER, TO SAY TO THE
PARALYTIC, ‘YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN,’ OR TO SAY ‘RISE, TAKE UP YOUR PALLET AND
WALK’?”

BUT 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, RISE, TAKE UP YOUR PALLET AND GO
HOME.”

AND HE ROSE, AND IMMEDIATELY TOOK UP THE PALLET AND WENT OUT BEFORE THEM ALL.

SO THEY WERE AMAZED AND GLORIFIED GOD, SAYING, “WE NEVER SAW ANYTHING LIKE
THIS.”

This is a story about faith, and how people journey with faith; grow in their faith, in different ways. This story wraps around the faith of the friends, the faith of the paralytic, the faith of the Scribes, and the faith of the crowd. And this morning I'd like to spend some time exploring these four different journeys as presented by Mark.

THE FAITH OF THE FRIENDS

Our story opens with four friends carrying a paralyzed friend on a stretcher to Jesus. We quickly learn that these friends are determined to get their friend to Jesus; no obstacle will stand in their way. They get to the house where Jesus is preaching, and the crowd prevents them from getting anywhere near the door. But they don't turn around. They don't say, "Well, it's really crowded today, guess we'll come back tomorrow." Or, "Let's leave our name and contact information so Jesus can track us down and visit us." Or, "This was a bad idea, let's just forget it." Plan A didn't work; they immediately went to Plan B.

Can't get in through the door, let's consider the roof! Palestinian houses had flat roofs, and there was usually an outside stairway that provided access to the roof. The roof consisted of flat beams laid across from wall to wall, perhaps three feet apart. The space between the beams was filled with brushwood packed tight with clay. A layer of earth was then placed on top of that to seal it, and often a flourishing crop of grass was growing in the dirt. So it was the filling between the beams of wood that these 4 men began to dig through to create an opening.

Your Bible may say "removed the roof to make an opening", or "they made an opening, and after digging through it." And honestly, this gives me a picture of people carefully moving aside the building materials in order to lower a friend down as safely as possible. The Greek word that Mark uses, however, actually means to *tear out*, here in reference to the sticks and mud of the roof. Often this verb was also used to describe *tearing out someone's eyes*. In other words, this is a frenzied, almost crazed activity on the part of these friends. They are up there, with their bare hands, frantically pulling, tearing, throwing grass, earth, clay, mud and sticks out of the way to make this hole.

They are desperate. They are not going to leave this place until their friend sees Jesus. Perhaps he is at the point of physical death. Or perhaps, emotionally and spiritually he is so beaten down that he has given up all hope. He has no desire to live anymore. All light has left his eyes. At all levels: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, he has given up. But his friends have not. They still believe in him. They still consider his life of worth and value. They are going to carry him to Jesus on their faith and hope.

Has God ever called you to be that kind of friend? To step in and be Faith, Hope and Love because your friend no longer has the energy, the will-power, the heart-strength to do it for himself or herself. Have you ever had to carry someone to the presence of Jesus because that person could no longer get there on his own? Sometimes it requires tenacity in the face of great odds. But most of all it requires love.

Anne Lamott in her book *Traveling Mercies* speaks about the love of her faith community, St. Andrews. She says:

Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrews tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of *home*—that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, "You come back now."

My relatives all live in the Bay Area and I adore them, but they are all as skittishly self-obsessed as I am, which I certainly mean in the nicest possible way. Let's just say that I do not leave family gatherings with the feeling that I have just received some kind of spiritual chemotherapy. But I do when I leave St. Andrew.

When I, a recovering drug-addict, stood up as a single mother and announced that I was pregnant, people cheered. All these old people, raised in Bible-thumping homes in the Deep South, clapped. Even the women whose grown up boys had been or were doing time in jails or prisons rejoiced for me. And then they set about providing for us. They brought clothes, they brought me casseroles, they brought me assurance that this baby was going to be part of the family. (*Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott, pages 100-101, Random House, 1999)

Do you provide that kind of community for someone else? The kind that offers Spiritual Chemotherapy. Isn't that a great twist of words? That God can use us to radiate a person with God's love, and God's grace, and God's forgiveness, and God's truth, that this person comes "home" to God. The Faith of a Friend can be a powerful healing presence. The friends of the paralytic said to him, "Fine, you can't make it to Jesus on your own. Then we'll carry you."

THE FAITH OF THE PARALYTIC

And it is the strong faith of his friends that makes the lack of faith in the paralytic stand out so sharply. This man no longer had hope. He was not only paralyzed physically, but it appears that he was also paralyzed emotionally, mentally and spiritually as well. And how does the story hint at this? The first words that Jesus speaks to him are, "My child, your sins are forgiven."

Jesus looked into the eyes, the mind, the heart of this man and knew that he was sick not only in body, but also in his soul.

Now, let me take a moment and point out that this is not always the case. Physical illness is not always the result of spiritual illness. If you take the time to read and study the healing stories of Jesus, you will discover that physical sickness is not always linked to sin. Sometimes Jesus heals people instantly, without any mention of sin. But in this particular case, sin is mentioned.

In Jesus' day, the Jews always connected sin and suffering. The Scribes and Pharisees argued that if a person was suffering, he or she must have sinned. You might remember that this is the argument that Job's friends presented to him. Or you might remember another healing story in the Gospel of John when Jesus healed a man blind from birth, and the even disciples asked Jesus: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus replied, "Neither. This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

Until Jesus came, the Jews believed that a sick person was someone with whom God was angry. It was integral to their belief system. Therefore, we don't know if this paralyzed man was sick because he *had* actually done something wrong and needed forgiveness, or if he had tried every cure and didn't get well, so now his *only recourse was to believe* "I must have sinned, otherwise I would get well."

What's interesting, is that Jesus doesn't have a long theological conversation with the man about the root cause of his need for forgiveness. He simply spoke words of forgiveness that broke through the chains of his paralysis. "Child, God is not angry with you. It's all right. You don't have to be afraid anymore. Your sins are forgiven. Come home." And the burden of terror and estrangement rolled from his heart.

Jesus' interaction with this paralyzed man speaks great hope to me. It tells me that no matter *where* I feel paralyzed, and no matter *why* I feel paralyzed, Jesus knows and understands all the motivations behind that paralysis. Whether it is from my own brokenness with God, from brokenness within my family, from brokenness with my community . . . whether it is physical, mental, emotional or spiritual . . . Jesus offers forgiveness and grace *to all* the shattered pieces of my life, and brings healing to my faith.

Do you feel paralyzed somewhere in your life? Look into Jesus eyes' and let him restore you to health.

THE FAITH OF THE SCRIBES

Jesus' words of forgiveness stir up some controversy in the hearts of the Scribes who are watching these events unfold before their very eyes. The scribes are the religious leaders who interpret the scriptures to the people. They are entrusted with keeping God's word pure and holy. And so the whole person of Jesus fascinates them, but also outrages them simultaneously.

Now, I must admit, that I have always read the scribes' reaction to Jesus in a rather haughty, judgmental tone of voice. That they were accusing him, challenging his authority. But I recently read an interpretation that suggested that the Scribes were truly puzzled by Jesus and that their reaction might have sounded like this:

Why does he talk like this? Isn't that blasphemy? Scripture teaches that only God can forgive sin. Do you understand what he's saying? Did I hear him right? What's your take on that, Judah? I don't know, Matthias, but it doesn't fit anything we've ever studied or been taught? Do you think he really believes he's God?

Their thoughts hinged on their belief system about sin and sickness. If sin caused sickness, then only God could forgive and heal. And Jesus just claimed authority as God. The crux of their dilemma: The divinity of Jesus.

And if I step back and consider the Scribes as honestly struggling and debating Jesus through the only lens that they were capable of in that moment, I come to the startling conclusion, that I could have been a Scribe in this story. Haven't there been times in my life when I have pondered, grappled with, the divinity of Jesus?

For many people, it's an honest struggle. How can someone be born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit? Why would Jesus forgive my sins?—they're too horrible for anyone to forgive; I'm not worth his time. In other words, I don't trust the validity of Jesus' claim that he has the power to forgive everyone's sin—even mine. Was Jesus really as good, and pure, and holy as all the stories make him out to be? Why is he so different? Isn't he just a great teacher like Mohammed or Gandhi or Buddha?

The late evangelist Corrie ten Boom shares the story of speaking to a class of University students in Canada. After the lecture, a very educated woman came and sat down with her. She said to Corrie:

What you just told the students was very interesting. But you are too narrow. I am an expert on world religions. I have traveled to many countries and have had long discussions with the leaders of many religious groups. I have discussed the road of life through time and eternity with Muslims, Brahmins, Shintoists, and many others. All of them know God, even though they do not believe in Jesus Christ. I am sorry to have to disagree with your talk this afternoon, but you put too much emphasis on Jesus Christ and do not allow that other religions are just as good as Christianity.

Corrie says, "I was embarrassed. Initially, I didn't know how to answer her. Then I remembered something a friend had once told me. You are not called to convince anyone. You are simply called to be an open channel for the Spirit of God to flow through. You can never be anything else, even though you may think so at the time. Follow the pathway of obedience, let the Word of God do its own work, and you will be used by God far beyond your own powers."

Therefore, Corrie said to the woman: "Your argument is not with me, but with the Bible. It is not I who say these things, it is the Word of God. Jesus said in John 14:6 "No man can come to the Father except through me." If you wish to dispute someone, dispute Jesus."

And that was the end of their conversation. Sometime later, Corrie had the opportunity to return to Canada to attend a special event, and imagine her surprise when she came face to face with this same woman.

The lady said to her, "I am glad to see you. I have never been able to forget what you said when you spoke at our university and when you quoted Jesus, "No one cometh to the Father except but by me." I have tried to argue with that from every angle, but am unable to get away from the fact that Jesus said it. I can argue with you, but I am having a difficult time arguing with Him."

"How wonderful!" Corrie told her. "Now you are listening! to the voice of God. Keep listening. He has much more to say to you."

"Yes," she said. "I believe he does."

And they parted, and Corrie never saw her again, but she said, "I know the Word of God is still doing its work in her life." (Tramp for the Lord by Corrie ten Boom, pages 128-129, Fleming Revell Company, 1974.)

Are you struggling with the divinity of Jesus? Then keep bringing your questions back to him! Continue to have a face-to-face dialogue with him. Jesus encourages it. In fact, he knows all about it.

In our story, Jesus knew immediately the struggle of the Scribes' faith to accept his identity as not only a man, but also as God's son. And so he actually gave them proof of who he was according to their rules. "You're right. Anyone can say to someone else 'your sins are forgiven.' What does that really prove? But because you need proof that I do have authority to forgive sins, I will also heal this man." And he told the paralyzed man to pick up his mat and walk. And the man got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of everyone.

What did the Scribes do then? Did they take a leap of faith and believe? Or did they come up with another rational explanation? The story doesn't tell us. But it does give us a possible clue.

THE FAITH OF THE CROWD

The story ends by saying that: "This amazed everyone, and they praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'"

I like to believe that even the Scribes who were present that day left praising God. For Mark uses the word "everyone." He didn't say some people were amazed and others still doubted. But that everyone left that day praising and honoring God. God received all the glory of that moment.

Where is your faith this morning?

Do you have the faith of the friends? Strong, courageous, tenacious, full of hope.

Do you have the faith of the paralytic? Paralyzed. Weak. Non-existent. Needing the power of forgiveness to break through all the walls and restore healing.

Do you have the faith of the scribes? Struggling. Questioning. Having face to face conversations with Jesus.

Do you have the faith of the crowds? Amazement. Praise. Glory to God for all you've seen and heard.

Each journey of faith is legitimate. And all these journeys of faith came together in one story that resulted in the amazing love and authority of Jesus being lifted high.

Wherever you are in your faith journey, Jesus is right there beside you. May this be your Good News, your Moment of Grace as you receive God's Word into your heart this morning.

Amen.

Other Sources:

The Gospel of Mark by William Barclay. Westminster Press. 1975.

Story Journey by Thomas E. Boomershine. Abingdon Press. 1988.