

FAITH FINDS A WAY

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 28, 2018
based on Mark 2:1–12; Matthew 4:23–25***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Journey to Jerusalem,” during which we are accompanying Jesus from his early ministry through his arrival during Holy Week in Jerusalem. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The gospel of Matthew summarizes the early public ministry of Jesus in the passage we heard a few moments ago—“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people . . . They brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.” (Matthew 4:23–24) Jesus’ early ministry, as described here, had two key aspects—preaching and healing. For Jesus, those two aspects were not separate activities but were closely intertwined. His preaching was designed to open people’s hearts to God’s healing—a healing that would include both body and soul—and his healings were designed not only to solve an immediate ailment but to bring a long-term spiritual message. Matthew gives us the picture of many people bringing the sick to Jesus, people with every sort of malady, and they all found healing in Jesus.

The gospels go on to recount many specific healing stories. We heard two of those last week—a story of Jesus healing a leper, and the story of Jesus providing healing for a Canaanite woman’s daughter—and we heard another healing story this morning. It is one of the most dramatic of all the healing stories, found early in the gospel of Mark.

Jesus was teaching in a house, and as typically happened, a crowd had gathered, with people filling the house and listening from outside through the windows. Four men approached—and it appears there were also some others with them—bringing a paralyzed man on a pallet. They were like the many others who had brought sick people to Jesus. But they could not get close to Jesus on account of the huge crowd. What did they do? With perseverance, ingenuity, and a good bit of boldness, they dug a hole through the roof, and lowered the man with ropes to Jesus.

Have you ever wondered what the homeowner thought about this? The roof, of course, was a flat roof. The typical roof at the time consisted of beams spaced fairly wide apart. The beams were covered over with a layer of sturdy sticks and mud, and that was then covered over and smoothed over with a water repellent layer of clay. There was usually a ladder or stairway up the side of the house to the roof, because people treated the roof somewhat like a patio. So these men had a way to get on the roof, although it must have been a challenge to carry their friend up to the roof. Once there, they could dig a hole between the roof beams. Imagine the uproar below as bits of the ceiling began to come

down and a hole opened up; these guys created quite a scene! One can only hope that they stayed around later to help the poor homeowner clean up and fix the roof!

When the gospel writers relate a story like this, it is not simply because it is an engaging story; it is because the story tells us something about ourselves and about God. The story of the man being let down through the roof actually brings us three crucial messages about faith and how we can be a part of Jesus' work for healing.

The first thing you notice about the characters in this story is the perseverance of the people who were bringing the paralyzed man. Their attitude provided the title for this morning's sermon—Faith Finds a Way. When their way was blocked into the house, they were undeterred. There are times in life when we may face an enormous challenge, and cannot see a way forward. Our story encourages us not to give up, but to keep on in faith, trusting that there can be a way.

A second major element in the story is the role of the friends, as they join together to carry this man to Christ. They are thus a model of spiritual friendship and intercession. Notice how, as they seek to help their friend, the center of their plan is to bring the man to Christ. So the story encourages us to engage in this kind of ministry—of bringing people to Christ. This could take the shape of inviting other people to church, or sharing something of our faith story to encourage others to likewise find help in Christ. We can also bring others to Christ in an important way through prayer. Whenever we pray for a person who is sick or in need, we are doing in a spiritual way what those four friends did in a physical way—we are carrying that person on our prayers to Christ, so that Christ will be at work for healing.

What this story illustrates so clearly is that God often works through groups of people who organize themselves to be vehicles by which God's grace can touch human lives. That is good definition of the church—we are a group organized so that people can be brought into connection with God's grace. The reality is that few people come into touch with God on their own. There is generally someone or a whole group of people who helped them to make the connection. I came to faith because my parents dragged me to church, my grandparents (I am quite sure) were praying for me, a bunch of Sunday School teachers put up with me at church, and all sorts of youth leaders and pastors and Christian friends walked with me on the way. You can likely think of all kinds of people who have helped you make the journey to Christ. So we see our calling to be those spiritual friends for others, to intercede on behalf of others to help them receive the healing power of Christ.

The third and most central element of this story occurs when the paralyzed man is finally in the presence of Christ. Here is where Jesus uses a healing to bring also a powerful spiritual message. When the man is let down through the roof, the story continues in Mark to report, "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2:5) The friends and the paralyzed man had come in faith,

receptive to Christ; but of course they had come for a healing. Why then does Jesus say, “Son, your sins are forgiven? Did Jesus believe that the man’s paralysis was the result of his sin? At the time, many people, including the scribes in Jesus’ audience, believed in fact that illness is a punishment for sin. I talked about this last week, but also noted that Jesus flat out rejected this whole line of thought. There was another occasion, for example, when Jesus was healing a blind man, and he was asked whose sins were responsible for the man’s blindness. He said, “No one’s.” [see John chapter 9] The man, Jesus said, was simply blind, and the blindness would be an occasion for God’s power to be made manifest. So Jesus did not believe that the paralyzed man was being punished for his sin.

Why then did he begin by pronouncing forgiveness for the man’s sin? This is part of the teaching aspect of this healing miracle. Jesus had no interest in being simply a “miracle healer.” There were plenty of such wonderworkers around, and although none of them could do the sorts of healings that Jesus did—healing the blind and paralyzed and people with leprosy—nevertheless Jesus had a much larger agenda. He had come not only to help people physically but to bring spiritual wholeness and everlasting life; and so Jesus was intent on spiritual as well as physical healing. Thus he begins in this story with spiritual healing, and so establishes a basic principle—whenever we come to God with any need, the first thing we need is a right relationship with God, so that we are receptive to God, and God’s Spirit can truly be at work in us. Jesus demonstrates that he can provide this connection with God, this most crucial healing of the soul, as he says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

That statement, however, upset the scribes, the religious authorities, who were present in the crowd, because they noticed that Jesus did not say that God would forgive the man’s sin. Jesus pronounced forgiveness himself; he acted in the place of God. Jesus later in the same story would call himself the “Son of Man” [*“so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . Mark 2:10*]

—a reference to the book of Daniel, where the “Son of Man” is a divine agent who brings God’s saving power into the world. Jesus was claiming that he had the authority of God, and that he could pronounce the mercy of God. And the scribes said to themselves, “This is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God alone?” [Mark 2:7] They had a good point. C.S. Lewis was right when he said that you cannot think of Jesus as simply a wise teacher or a good philosopher, because Jesus identified himself with God. So either he was a madman, which is what the scribes would have said, or he was who he said he was—he was God present and acting among us.

Jesus perceived what the scribes were thinking, and he challenged them, saying, “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your mat and walk?’” [Mark 2:9] This is something of a trick question, to which there is no clear answer, and which provides a setup for what will follow. If you were to try to respond to Jesus’ question, you could decide that the more difficult thing to say would be, “Rise, take up your mat and walk,” since if you make that pronouncement, the guy has to actually

stand up and walk! It seems much easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” since the impact of that statement is hidden and not so testable. On the other hand, the statement, “Your sins are forgiven,” if it really is going to be true, is actually more difficult, since while there are many physicians on earth who can heal the body, only the Lord can forgive sins. And the pronouncement, “Your sins are forgiven,” is perhaps especially difficult to make, because it is not easy to demonstrate that your pronouncement has actually done anything or had any effect. This is precisely the situation in which Jesus stood. He had pronounced forgiveness for the man, but the scribes did not believe that his statement had any effect.

Jesus’ questions, however, caught the scribes flatfooted. They could not say that it is easier to tell the man to stand up and walk, since no one but God could heal a man paralyzed like this. But they also could not say that it was easier to pronounce forgiveness for sin, since they had just insisted that only God could do that. From their perspective, Jesus could not successfully make either of those pronouncements.

What Jesus has done here is to create a tension-filled, highly dramatic teaching moment. This is similar to what we saw Jesus doing in a Scripture story we considered last Sunday, when Jesus, in an interchange with a Gentile woman, created a highly charged, intense scene by which he finally conveyed a profound spiritual message. In our story this morning, in this house, the scene is as dramatic as any. A paralyzed man has been let down through the roof. Jesus has pronounced forgiveness of the man’s sins. The scribes have challenged Jesus’ authority. And Jesus has just created a scenario in which he can prove his spiritual authority and his power to bring about both spiritual and physical healing.

In raising those questions about the relationship between spiritual and physical healing, Jesus was using the scribes’ own attitude to prove them wrong about him. He knew that the scribes believed that there is a direct connection between spiritual and physical well-being, and that according to the scribes, the only way that this man could be healed would be if his sins were first forgiven. Jesus had just pronounced such forgiveness, and now he continues, “In order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—‘Rise, take up your mat and return to your home.’” (Mark 2:10–11) At that, Mark reports, “The man stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them.” (Mark 2:12)

The scribes were speechless. Jesus had undeniably demonstrated his spiritual authority—that he has the power to heal both soul and body—and the people, we are told, glorified God. *[They were all amazed and glorified God. Mark 2:12]*

Our story thus declares clearly who Jesus is—he is the Messiah, the Savior—and it declares what Jesus can do; for we see how Jesus can heal the whole self. The Scripture thus encourages us to put our trust in Christ, and to seek that holistic healing—to in fact seek first that spiritual cleansing and wholeness so that the reviving power of the Lord’s Spirit can fully take hold in our lives.

Our story in Mark begins as a story in which the way to wholeness is blocked. The friends and the paralyzed man cannot get into the house, and then when they do, the scribes suggest that what they want from Jesus is impossible. But faith finds a way, and that way finally is Jesus. So we are invited to come to Christ in faith, and to bring others to Christ in faith, so that His life-giving power can be at work in us.