

Sermon for Sunday, January 7, 2024

Mark 2:1-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As we enter into the new year, we begin our reading of the gospel of Mark. Most scholars agree that Mark was the first gospel to actually be written down. Some think that it was originally an oral account of Jesus' life. If you take the time to read it aloud it takes about an hour and fifteen minutes and it's easy to imagine it being "performed" before an audience. And so with that we begin to look more carefully at today's Scripture reading. There's a lot going on in this story including lots of words that are easy to just slide right over but these words actually give us good insights. Today I'm going to focus on verses 1-12, the healing of a paralyzed man.

The Scripture says in verse 1 that Jesus was *at home*. What does that mean? You might say that home is one's place of residence or a familiar or usual setting. One could say is that it means that you are settled in a place and that it is a comfortable place for you. So where is Jesus' home? Jesus was born in Bethlehem but he is referred to many times in all of the gospels as being from Nazareth. Nazareth is where he grew up; where Mary and Joseph raised him. Today's reading opens with the following words: "When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home." Our best understanding is that at some point in Jesus' adult life he moved to the city of Capernaum and established it as his home and base of operations.

On Wednesday evening as we spent time looking at this Scripture lesson, the tearing of a hole in the roof really captured Sid Featherstone's attention. And we all can imagine why: he, more than most of us, understands the mess that would be created when a hole is torn in a roof.

Likely the roof of Jesus' home had a layer of wooden logs or beams as a primary support. Above that there would be a layer of grasses, thatch, or perhaps palm leaves/branches. Whichever material was used, it would be tightly bundled together; enabling it to shed water and act as good insulation. Tearing a hole in the roof likely means that the whole roof will have to be re-thatched otherwise it will leak at the place of repair.

Would you forgive someone if they purposefully tore a hole in your roof? Probably not. Yet Jesus looks at this paralyzed man, and likely glances at the friends who lowered him through the hole and says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." At first hearing it might mean that Jesus forgives everyone involved in this escapade for their crazy attempt to bring healing to this man.

As is often the case with Jesus, it's not just a superficial forgiveness for the hole in the roof. There's always a deeper meaning. Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven." Sins, plural, more than one. We're going to dig into the cultural and religious understandings of sin more deeply next week. For now, suffice it to say that Jesus is claiming the ability to forgive sins: a task given exclusively to God. Since only God can forgive sins, it's a short step for the people in his audience to make the mental leap that Jesus is God or claiming to be God or God's son. And that's a dangerous proposition to make in a world where the only law is religious law enforced by religious authorities.

There are two points that I want to make about forgiveness. When I, as your pastor, speak the words of absolution at the end of the confession, I am not forgiving you. I am speaking in the name of God to declare that from God's perspective you are forgiven. Some years ago at my first call there was a couple who would come to live in Lime Springs for the summer. Betty and Hal would routinely attend worship at Saetersdal, the country church I served.

Just as I do here at the start of worship, I routinely led the worshippers in the confession and absolution (the declaration of forgiveness.) Hal was adamant that only God can forgive. In spite of a healthy and respectful conversation about the matter, he couldn't accept that I was NOT doing the forgiving but merely speaking the words on God's behalf. But I stand by the words that I said earlier: I am not forgiving you. I am declaring in the name of God that you are forgiven because God HAS forgiven you. This is one of my responsibilities as your pastor.

The second point that I wish to clarify is that when I step out of my role as pastor and act as a private person, I am expected to forgive those who have hurt me. You are too. We pray this in the Lord's prayer...forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. In many places and cultures forgiveness is seen as a sign of weakness. Jesus' declaration of forgiveness was shocking in that time and place. It remains so still. But, as followers of Jesus we are expected to follow his example. Not just to declare that people are forgiven but to be the ones who insist that forgiveness is for us and

for the person on the other side. *(Everything written above is based on the work of N.T. Wright in his commentary Mark for Everyone.)*

There is that story from Corrie ten Boom's book, *Tramp for the Lord* that I have shared with you in the past. She talks about going out after World War II and speaking to audiences about her faith. One night after her talk a man comes up to her that she recognized as a guard from the prison camp where she and her sister were interned. Her sister died in the camp, but somehow Corrie survived. The man extends his hand and asks for forgiveness. Corrie describes the multitude of thoughts that flashed through her mind. She knew Jesus' teachings about forgiveness. But she wasn't sure she could say the words. She realized though that with God's help she could extend her hand to this man. And she does. As she does so she realizes that she is capable of forgiveness. No, forgiveness is not a sign of weakness. It is actually a sign of amazing strength. In extending her hand Corrie is actually set free from much that had tormented her.

Receiving God's forgiveness and as a result recognizing that we are called to forgive one another is a powerful lesson that is an extension of today's Scripture reading.

There's one more lesson coming out of this reading that is important to emphasize. That's the example of community demonstrated by this man's friends. The paralyzed man had friends who were willing to do whatever it took to bring him into Jesus' presence. They were willing to carry him on his pallet to Jesus' home. They were willing to carry him up to the roof. They were willing to tear a hole in roof and let him down into Jesus' presence. They sacrificed much to bring this man into the presence of the *healer*. (Honestly, we don't even know if the paralyzed man wanted to see Jesus.) But his friends were willing to take multiple chances to make it happen. This is a powerful example of community. The reading says that when Jesus saw "their faith" meaning the faith of the paralyzed man's friends he spoke the words, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Community made a difference in the paralyzed man's life. Community makes a difference in our lives. That's part of why we gather as we do: to nurture a community of friends that care for one another. We gather and we pray and we support and we teach the children and the youth and we sustain one another through our faith and our friendship. And as you well know: sometimes it is our faith that sustains and carries someone whose faith is flailing and

weak. This is the power of Christian community and this is why we gather as we do.

That crowd of people around Jesus' door came to hear him teach. They were curious about what he was saying. But they also had a common experience as they saw the roof torn open and the paralyzed man healed. Community was being created at that moment. Community is created and nurtured when we come to hear about Jesus, about his teachings and his healing actions.

I trust and pray that you have been strengthened in our worship today. I trust and pray that as you partake in communion you will be strengthened even more to go out into your neighborhood and community and faithfully support the "paralyzed" of this world. Amen.