

BREAKING THROUGH THE ROOF

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 41; Mark 2:1-12

There is a painting in the National Gallery in Washington entitled, “The Healing of the Paralytic.” It is considered to be “Netherlandish” and it’s dated between 1560 and 1590; a good sized portrait almost 43” by 30”. In the foreground, the paralytic in a dark red tunic, his sleeves rolled up on his white shirt, has a huge bundle of straw and bedding slung over his left shoulder. He is bent down with its weight, his back bowed by the heaviness of it. It’s as if all of his life is rolled up in that sack, the weight of years of incapacity bearing down on him, a burden he has always carried in one way or another.

His left hand is still locked in a kind of tight paralyzed grip, perhaps the residue of hands forced into that shape for a lifetime, and even the freeing of his hands have not yet convinced him that he can use them, except ever so carefully.

The paralytic’s eyes are downcast, looking at the road under his bare feet, contemplating what his life will be like now. In fact, his right leg is exposed and it is unwithered, his strong muscles looking as if they have not been the only problem holding him back. Behind him in the distance is the house where the crowd is still gathered in the doorway, and one can see why you couldn’t get in, there are so many of them. Jesus has come out of the house and is tending to another person lying on a pallet.

Finally, there is the roof of the house, that roof through which the paralytic’s friends lowered him dramatically so that they could position him in front of Jesus. The four friends are still on the roof in the painting where they are patching the hole that they have dug, an artist’s sense of humor perhaps. They are repairing the damage to the house; thereby satisfying everyone who has ever asked the question, “But what about the roof?”

I guess it was the least that they could do. I mean these folks had done some real physical damage to the house and it needed attention. It’s one thing to get your friend some help in the most resourceful way imaginable, and quite another to create a homeowner’s insurance claim that would be hard to explain.

Nonetheless, the anonymous “Netherlandish” artist of the sixteenth century settles once and for all what really good fellows these friends are. They not only tear the house open to get their friend the help he needs, but they also repair the damage!

The story is really quite amazing if you think about it. Jesus has gained a reputation as a healer. First it was the man with an unclean spirit, and then Peter’s mother in law that he healed, then diverse people in Capernaum that came to him, a leper cleansed outside of the city when they were on the road, and then, back at home, this paralytic. Jesus is really on a roll in these first two chapters of Mark’s gospel.

And I find it astounding that the friends in this story are able to accomplish what they do. The story really hinges on them. They must have heard about Jesus, or maybe one of them had been present to witness some of the earlier healings and came back to the others raving about Jesus and his curative power. Whatever it was that had preceded,

the four friends convinced the paralytic that they were going to get him some help, come hell or high water.

So they gathered up that poor diminished paralytic and wrapped him in his bedding and got him on his pallet and started working their way toward the house where Jesus was staying.

Imagine how their hearts must have sunk when they saw that everybody else in town had the same idea. Everybody who had a problem of any sort had come to the house that day for help. It was like the subway at rush hour, people packed against the doors, squeezed in everywhere, faces smooshed against the windows, nobody moving in or out. It was impossible to get a man on a pallet carried by four friends into the foyer much less into the living room. They laid him down for just a minute so that they could think. And one of them got the bright idea that they should crawl up on the roof break it open, and lower the paralytic down.

In the living room below, there must have been a gasp when the first of the thatch and dried mud started to drop down and it was apparent that the house was being broken into.

Once he is lowered into the house, the paralytic says and does nothing. In fact, he doesn't even ask to be healed. Not a word passes his lips. Instead, Mark tells us that when Jesus saw *their* faith, *meaning the faith of the friends*, he healed the paralytic.

And that's pretty remarkable in and of itself, don't you think? I mean we wouldn't bat an eye if Mark had said, when he saw the faith of the paralytic, he healed him, but instead it was the faith of the friends that moved Jesus, and so he healed the paralytic.

The story inside the story, is the controversy that ensued when Jesus performed the healing. It would have been a lot simpler if Jesus had just said, "Be healed." But instead, he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." A forgiveness that links healing and sin in a way that makes most of us get very uncomfortable. It certainly made the scribes uncomfortable, because they questioned in their hearts who Jesus thought he was, forgiving this man's sin, when *they* knew that *only God* could forgive sins. It was the beginning of a controversy that would eventually do Jesus in. It deserves a sermon of its own, but not today. Today I want to stick with the story of the friends, and what they had to do to get the paralytic the healing that he needed.

There are two aspects of the story, the barrier that forced the friends up to the roof, and the faith in Jesus and love for their friend that caused them to break open the house to get him to the one who could heal him.

First the barriers. Most of us in the church are oblivious to the possibility that we might stand in the doorway blocking the access of others who want and need to get to Jesus; who want to get inside the house that is the church, so that they, too, can make their way to God. And yet, often without even thinking of what we are doing, we do stand in the way.

Sometimes it's because we are shoulder to shoulder, so close and friendly and all supportive and interlocked and blessed by the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love that nobody can break through, we're so tight with each other. You've probably played

that game in junior high, where you make a circle and grasp hands and try to keep the person out who wants to come in the circle, until finally they just give up, it's too exhausting trying to break in.

Well, the church can be like that. Someone wrote me a letter of concern this week regarding the image the church conveys about itself as inclusive, and asked whether that is really so. He noticed that most of the people being ordained as officers last Sunday were white. Not very many people of Asian heritage, or African, or Caribbean, or Hispanic. Not many.

And on our website, how many faces are white and what that says to a person of color who is looking on from afar and wondering what they will need to do in order to be welcome in the house, or whether the roof may have to cave in before that happens.

I explained that we do indeed have diversity on our boards, women, Hispanic, African American, Caribbean extraction, Asian; that the nominating committee actively reaches out to invite more participation from people of diverse backgrounds, but not everyone accepts that invitation. Still there is more that can be done.

I remember attending a college function here in town and talking with a man whom I discovered lived in this neighborhood only a block away and who had never visited here for worship. I said, "You'll have to come some Sunday. Our services are at 11:00 o'clock." And he said, "Which church is that?" And I said, "On the corner of Fifth Avenue between 11th and 12th." He said, "Is that the church that has the iron fence all around it?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Oh, that church always looks closed to me, the gates are kind of foreboding, so I just thought that church wasn't open any more."

The gay and lesbian community of the Village and Chelsea and lower Manhattan blends very naturally into this congregation, I think. But a visitor doesn't always know that. And many of our gay and lesbian members tell me that they have a hard time making friends and receiving a warm welcome when they first come. Or they experience a welcome at first, but then cannot find their way deeper into the church later on.

An Asian woman in the congregation told me some time ago that she found it very hard to meet other people here. I encouraged her to come to coffee hour, and she said, "Oh you don't understand. In Korea, a woman does not enter a room of strangers and introduce herself to people she does not know, a friend must accompany her and make introductions."

Many of our younger couples come to the church, new to the city, sometimes looking for a church to settle into, maybe even a church in which to be married. And they are married here, and then tend to drift away because they don't get connected with other young couples here. Some older and newer members complain about that, saying, "They just come here and get married and use the church, and never come back again." But I wonder, do we ever ask ourselves what it is that we might do to help our newly married couples get more involved, or do you have to break open the roof to get inside?

The church as an institution can be a bit foreboding in a culture that is not very familiar with rituals and creeds any more, and has forgotten how to pray, and has never read the Bible, or been baptized. We are trying to be the church in a new and challenging age, and it is more like the first century in Corinth or Galatia or Ephesus today than it was

fifty years ago when everybody went to a mainline church and was learning their catechism together, and saying the creeds by memory. Everybody knew the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed in Eisenhower's America. But even Christians today do not know them.

People who come to church often consider themselves *seekers* rather than *believers* today. No wonder some people who have never been to church before prefer worship to be more like a rock concert than an experience of the sacred and holy.

I'm not proposing that we disconnect the organ in favor of a rock band or start meeting in the auditorium of the New School rather than in this glorious sanctuary. But rather that we ask ourselves how we can keep the doorways open and the reception warm and the hospitality flowing and the access routes accessible so that all God's people, those on pallets and those on good and brave and sturdy legs can make their way in and feel at home and know that they are welcome, and that both God and we are glad to see them. It is, after all, God's house they're trying to get into, not ours.

Having heard that caution about the dangers of closing ourselves off in the church, inadvertently blocking the doors, we need to hear the other part of the story about the friends who are willing to do anything to bring the paralytic to the place where Jesus is.

These friends in the story are amazing. They are determined to get the paralytic help no matter what the cost. And it is *their* faith that becomes the occasion of the healing of the paralytic, not any faith that the paralytic expresses on his own.

I think about the role of friends in our lives, the people in the stands who cheer us on, and how their faith in us brings us healing. Carlyle Marney, wise sage of the church, was the first to coin the phrase "balcony people", those saints who look on from afar and inspire and bless us and wish us well.

Sometimes it is those balcony people who believe more in us than we believe in ourselves. They are the ones who know our name and whose example inspires our faith. They go before us to serve as lights to our path and guides to our way. And sometimes when we cannot get to help ourselves, they are the ones ready to carry us.

The best of friends speak the truth to us and tell us not what we *want* to hear, but what we *need* to hear. Someone so invested in who we are, and yet so un-invested as well that they offer us a perspective no other can give. The Wisdom writer of proverbs describes their role this way, "Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy."¹

I think about the kind of friendship that these four held for the paralytic in the story. Because in all honesty, someone who is paralyzed is not necessarily a winsome friend in return, someone who, at surface level, is not able to give back much.

To be a friend to someone who is dependent on basic support is to take on a serious responsibility. After all, this paralytic, depending on the severity of his physical challenges might not have been able to bathe, dress, get to the toilet, or even feed himself. To become the friend of a person who has physical limitations is to enter into an intimate covenant relationship in which help is often assumed and necessary. It is not

uncomplicated because sometimes the person who most resents this relationship is the person most dependent upon it.

Friendship is a delicate balance between being available and intervening, between being aware of when to offer help, and when to allow one's friend to choose that timing. It is learning not to impose your own truth, your own way, your own answers on another person's challenges in life, but allowing your friend enough room to learn her own answers in her own time. That is, after all, the only time and the only learning that counts.

Paralysis comes in many forms, you know. Not just in the physical. There is also spiritual paralysis, and emotional, and psychological. We freeze-up with fear sometimes, or with anxiety about tomorrow, or with self-pity or grief or blame, a sense of helplessness that gets a grip on us and seizes our ability to move forward in life.

Fortunate are those who have friends who can point in the direction of help, or even bear us up on their shoulders in difficult times; friends so ready to help us when we are ready to ask for help that they will even break through the roof and lower us to the place and to the One who can bring us healing.

We are meant to be friends like that in the church. Friends who are ready when the time is right to do everything we can to bring others to the place where help is available and even our faith can be used by God to bring healing. The friends in the story are, after all, the heroes of the piece. It is *their* faith that Jesus notices and that effects the healing of the paralytic.

Jesus chose twelve disciples to walk with him the dusty trails and desert sands of a time long ago and a land far away, a land that I will return to see once again by tomorrow's light. Some of the twelve proved better friends to him than others. But in John's gospel as they sat at table the night of Jesus' arrest, he said to all of them, "I have not called you servants, but friends."² And ever since, we have been invited to serve him as friends as well, like those friends who bore the paralytic to the house that day that Jesus was at home; friends who would not stop at anything to make sure their companion found the healing he needed.

We all need a friend or two like that in our lives, four would be an abundance. And I wonder if the old adage about friends is never truer in this respect than in any other; that in order to have a friend, we must first be one.

Friends, let us love one another as Christ has loved us, because by this everyone will know that we are his disciples.³

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¹ Proverbs 27:6

² John 15:15

³ John 13:34-35.