

Mark 2:1-12
What are friends for?
WRCoB 1.12.20

Many of us grew up cradle Christians.

Our earliest memories consist of going to church on Sundays.

The Bible, the hymns, the long sermons
Prayers before meals and bedtime
Discussions around the dinner table
That included God and Jesus
All part of our upbringing.

For us, coming through the front door of church is no problem.

It's home.

But there are people who are not cradle Christians
Who are anti-intuitional and suspicious of church
That have a hard time
Walking through the front door of a church.

Their perception of church is that of a group of people
Filled with condescension and a holier-than-thou attitude
Believing in some kind of fairytale notion
of God in person.

Yes, you will find some of that.

However, those who know the healing power in Jesus Christ
And who experience support in the faith community

Who wish their non-church friends
 Could be a part of a faith community

It's hard to know how to introduce Jesus to them.

We think if only we can get them in the front door of church.

But I ask . . . is there another way in?

The story before us may offer some clues.

~~

It is early in Jesus' ministry.

Jesus has called many of his disciples
 And is now going around throughout Galilee.

He is driving out demons, healing the sick
 And teaching the kingdom of God.

Capernaum is now his home.

Jesus came home hoping to find rest.

But rest he did not find.

When people heard he was in Capernaum
 So many people had gathered
 There was no room in the house
 And no way in through the front door.

And instead, of a lot of pushing and shoving
Everyone was still and listened to Jesus
As he preached the word to them.

While all this was going on
Four men came carrying a paralytic on a mat.

~

Just a word on this Greek word *paralytikon*.

According to Bob Bowman,
Retired pastor, author, and professor
In the Church of the Brethren

In Greek medical literature of the time
The word's meaning was broader.

It referred to loss of strength, loss of sensation
Or even loss of will.

It covered what we call depression
As well as physical disease of paralysis.

~

When the four came to the house
They could not get anywhere near the front door.

Rather than fight the crowd
They walked up the outside staircase to the roof.

They, then, dug down through the earthen outer shell
Down through the small branches
Down through the opening below.

Meanwhile all the rubble from their excavation
Fell down on the people surrounding Jesus.

They lowered their friend on the mat
Down into the crowded room below.

Seriously, can you imagine?

When Jesus saw their faith
He said to the man in the gurney
“Your sins are forgiven.”

Now, why would Jesus say this?

Maybe Jesus saw what we cannot see.

The man on the mat’s paralysis
Is not a physical condition.

We might never know for sure.

But what we do know is that
There is power in forgiveness.

And God alone has the power to forgive sins.

“Your sins are forgiven,” Jesus declared.

There were within the room, teachers and ministers of the faith
Church folk I would call them.

And they began thinking to themselves.

What gives this man the ability to forgive sins?

Jesus knew what was on their hearts
And so he asked,

*Which is easier, to tell this man his sins are forgiven?
Or to tell him to stand up, take his mat, and walk?*

And without waiting for an answer
He told the paralytic
Get up, take your mat and go home.

And the paralytic did as he was told.
And everyone was amazed.

~~

It is a great story.

Several things stick out in my mind
As I consider the lessons from this story.

First, there is a connection between forgiveness and healing.

Whether the paralysis was due to guilt or a physical illness
We'll never know.

But because of Jesus both lose their ability to paralyze.

~

Secondly, the four carried their friend
Not through the front door
But down through the roof

They found another way to Jesus.
Their persistence paid off.
Their friend healed.

Hopefully, the homeowner's insurance covered the damages.

Some have a hard time finding Jesus
Through the front door

Maybe the crowd surrounding the front door
Turns them off.

We need to help our friends
To find alternative entrances to the presence of Jesus.

~~

Another thing that sticks out to me
Is the sentence that reads Jesus saw "their" faith.

Their faith.
Not the faith of the paralytic
Their faith!

It was the faith of the four
Determined to see their friend healed
That caused Jesus to heal him.

Scripture doesn't say whether the paralytic had faith.

But we know if his four friends did.

What a blessing for the paralytic
To have the kind of friends he had.

Would that we would have friends like that.

Would that we be friends like that.

~~

Church is to be something like that.

Rather than hanging around the front door
Blocking its entrance

We should be out finding ways
To bring our non-churched friends
Into the saving graces of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We might not be able to convince someone
To come in through the front door

But there are other ways to bring people to faith.

Not only do I believe people need Jesus
They need a Christian community of faith
The body of Christ, his church.

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In an article in *Wired Magazine* explains why
Alcoholics Anonymous has been able to help
Millions fight their alcoholism.

Despite all we've learned over the past few decades about psychology, neurology, and human behavior, contemporary medicine has yet to devise anything that works markedly better.

The article describes a few examples.

- *In 1905 a Boston physician named Joseph Pratt organized weekly meetings for patients with tuberculosis. He was simply trying to teach them better health habits; surprisingly, he discovered that the groups also excelled at providing emotional support. He concluded that by sharing about their "common disease" they developed a "common bond."*
- *In a more recent study at Stanford University, a pair of researchers reviewed over 200 studies on group therapy and concluded that group members "develop close bonds with the other members and are deeply influenced by their acceptance and feedback."*
- *A 2009 study of those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder found that 88.3 percent of those who participated in group therapy no longer exhibited PTSD symptoms, versus just 31.3 percent of those who received minimal one-on-one interaction.*
- *There is also evidence that the act of confessing one's faults to a few safe people—enshrined in AA's fifth step—helps in changing addictive patterns. According to the researchers, "Revealing one's deepest flaws and hearing others do likewise forces a person to confront the terrible consequences of their alcoholism—something that is very difficult to do alone."*

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The article doesn't mention church . . . but it should.

Because when church is at its best
It is all this and much more.

When led by the Holy Spirit
Church binds us together
Through our common experience of sin.

It then creates us more fully human
In the common experience of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Church is a place we can find a sense of belonging
And help in becoming better people
Holding each of us responsible and accountable

A place we celebrate the power of Jesus
To forgive, to guide, and to forge a new community
Into something like the kingdom of God.

There is a reason church have survived for 2000 years.

However today, people are suspicious and skeptical
Of the institution of church.

And for this reason
We, as friends of non-churched people
Need to find a different way
To bring them before the graces of Jesus.

If we can't get them through the front door
Let's try another way.

~~

I think the young family's monthly potluck is a way
To bring people to Jesus.

We have met over several months
With food and fellowship as our primary goal.

It is hard to do much more than that
With a bunch of kids running around.

But it's nice to be together.

I'd like to see us begin to invite friends
To be a part of this monthly social event

In hopes that they might be drawn
To become a part of something grander.

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I like the idea of combining
The Boy Scout's Brunswick Stew event
With Trunk or Treat
And a campfire, s'mores kind of thing

If nothing else, it might bring folks closer to the front door.

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I like the idea of offering non-religious workshops.

It is a great, nonthreatening way
To introduce people to the community of faith.

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What I have heard repeatedly
Is our society's lack of community
And the need to belong to one.

What better community than a healthy Christian community?

We been trying for years
To bring them through the front door.

Perhaps now is the time to find another way.

In our lesson today
The paralytic had friends who cared enough

That they forced their way into the presence of Jesus
In hopes that Jesus would heal him.

Oh that we would be like them!

It was their faith that brought healing.

Let us pray our faith might do the same.

What are friends for?