

## “Beyond Paralysis”

Mark 2: 1-12

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Debbie Osterhoudt

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This morning we will consider an event which occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as the gospel writer of Mark tells it the story of Jesus.

A reminder: Mark’s gospel is the earliest account we have of Jesus’ life and ministry; it is believed that it was written sometime around 65 AD. About a generation after the death of Jesus. There is an urgency in Mark’s narrative. He uses the word “immediately” often. It is as though he is anxious to tell us the story of Jesus and it was a matter of great urgency for him and the early church. Years later Matthew and Luke would use Mark’s gospel in writing their own gospel stories and they would add much more narrative and many of the teachings of Jesus. This morning’s scripture reading comes from the second chapter of Mark’s gospel. There are similar stories in Matthew and Luke’s gospel. But Mark places this story at the beginning of his narrative and he has some interesting elements to the story that are not in Luke or Matthew’s gospels.

Prayer for Understanding:

Spirit of the living God, write your Word on the tablets of our hearts. Empower us to be your witnesses in the world. Strengthen us and broaden our vision so that we might bring those who are suffering, broken, lame, diseased into the healing presence of your Son. We pray that not only our words but our choices, our actions, the manner in which we

choose to live our lives will be a reflection of your grace and love. Amen.

Jesus once said to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, (now this is important, especially in our world today), if any want to become my followers (implying that we are perfect yet and we continue to have much to learn) if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Deny self and take up your cross. At the time of this conversation, a cross was simply a method of execution preferred by the Roman government. It struck fear into people’s hearts. There were days when the streets to Jerusalem were lined with crosses, each of them bearing the dead or dying body of someone whose public execution was meant to scare everyone who saw it. It reinforced the idea that death was the most awful thing in the world and everyone should do everything to avoid it. By telling the disciples to pick up their crosses and follow him, Jesus was defying that idea. He suggested that there are worse things than death, and living in fear was near the top of the list. If they were going to let fear run their lives, then fear would become their god. Giving in to fear was not the only choice Jesus’ followers had. Instead of surrendering themselves to their fear, they could surrender themselves to God. And beyond fear and even death is the possibility of new life. The kind of fear of which I am speaking creates a kind of paralysis. An inability to move, to live fully, as God has created us to live. Jesus is suggesting that we confront our fear, recognizing the paralysis it causes in our lives.

Read Mark 2: 1-12

There is a story told about Saint Francis of Assisi. The people of one of the nearby villages in Gubio, Italy, contacted Francis, asking for his help. The people of Gubio were paralyzed by fear of a wolf who would venture into their village at night and kill chickens and livestock. Each night the wolf would visit the village; the people became so fearful that they

stayed in their homes at night with their doors shut and locked. Once a village that enjoyed community activities at night, after work had ceased, the village became a ghost town at night, with no one daring to stir beyond their locked doors. I believe that we have become a people who are often driven to act out of our fear. We might consider what it is, exactly, that motivates/initiates our fear. When St. Francis arrived in Gubio to offer aide, he sat in the town square as night fell, waiting for the wolf. Not long after the sun set the wolf approached St. Francis, who immediately stood and stared the wolf in the eyes and asked: “Mr. Wolf, why are you terrorizing these kind people by killing their livestock and animals?” To which the wolf replied: “It is not my intention to cast fear into their hearts. I simply am hungry and looking for something to eat.” Self preservation is a powerful motivator of our actions. That night St. Francis struck as deal with the people of Gubio and the wolf. If they would provide food for the wolf each night, the wolf would no longer steal their livestock. From that time forward the people of Gubio and the wolves lived peacefully in community. They didn’t exactly become the best of friends – afterall the wolf was a wolf and the people were people. But they learned to respect and understand each other. The fear subsided.

Paralysis. Paralysis is defined as a partial or complete loss or temporary interruption of a function, especially of voluntary motion or of sensation in some part or all of the body. Any condition of helpless inactivity or of inability to act. I believe that paralysis is often born of grief.

Paralysis. Paralysis is characterized by an inability to act or perceive a different way of life. There are people all around us who know what it feels like to be paralyzed. I suspect that each of us sitting here this morning has experienced some form of paralysis. We know what it means to perceive our world as limited and closed. Most of us have experienced what it means

to be dependent on other people, and if we have not, then we will at some point in our lives. We know what it means to be trapped in the bottom of the well of pain and grief. Unable to move or feel. Powerless. And our fear is that there might not be anything beyond our paralysis. Our fear is usually grounded in either the past or the perceived future. Jesus offers us new life beyond the paralysis if we are willing to pick up our cross and follow him. And Jesus doesn't say: "If" you have a cross, pick it up. Nor does he say: "If" you don't have one go out and find one. He assumes that we all have crosses of some sort - something we fear, something which paralyzes us, preventing the possibility of new life and wholeness. He simply invites us to pick our crosses- whatever it is that strikes fear and our hearts to the extent that we are paralyzed – pick it up and follow. Acknowledge it and then pick it up.

Four friends pick up the man suffering from paralysis and carry him to Jesus. If it were not for the paralyzed man's friends, he would have had no access to Jesus and to healing. Carting the paralyzed man's pallet to Jesus was no easy endeavor. The house was packed; there was a throng of people standing around the doorway and it was standing room only inside the house; a press of humanity seeking to see and touch and hear Jesus of Nazareth, miracle worker and preacher. There was no way the friends could carry a paralyzed man through that sea of humanity. Undaunted by the impossibility of reaching Jesus with their friend, they become creative, imagining alternative ways of reaching the source of what they believed to be their friend's healing. Together they envisioned where the open doors to health and wholeness might be for their paralyzed friend. It demanded risking for the sake of another; engaging in hard work to press through that crowd, climbing up onto a roof, cutting a hole through timbers and digging through the mud plastering. It was a sacrifice of time and self. To make the point directly and bluntly, these people lugging the stretcher up onto the roof of the house tell the church today

what it is to do. We enact God's care for others through providing them access to God's healing love in Christ Jesus.

I'm sure the four friends had busy lives of their own — spouses, children, employment, houses of their own to maintain. Struggles and agendas of their own. Sacrificing, by their own choice, their needs and wants, the four friends realized the absolute truth that “my wholeness depends upon your faith. Your wholeness is dependent upon my faith.” We are interconnected. As friends, our healing can only occur when we are willing to carry and be carried.

St. Augustine says that friendship is an image of God's love for us; self-sacrificing friendship mirrors the love that Christ showed for us on the Cross and when he taught that “no greater love can one have than to lay down one's life for one's friend.” (John 15:13) Do our words and our behaviors mirror the love of Jesus Christ for us? If not, we are not being the people Christ calls us to be.

The preacher of Ecclesiastes says: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.” (4:9)

Albert Camus: “Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me and be my friend.”

And so, the man, who was paralyzed, with the persistent and determined help from his friends, encounters Jesus.

And the first words out of Jesus' mouth: “My son, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus uses an endearing form of an address, perhaps indicating his recognition that this man, who is suffering from paralysis, is ready to enter into relationship with Jesus, and thus with his God. And, the declaration of forgiveness comes suddenly and surprisingly before any word of healing. It is not

that Jesus sees this man as particularly sinful. Rather, Jesus is concerned about both the physical and spiritual dis-ease of the man who is before him. One is not necessarily connected to the other. And then again, sometimes disease of the spirit can indeed be manifested through physical illness.

Jesus cares for the whole person – mind, body and spirit.

Whatever your cross is - maybe it is a spiritual paralysis or a physical paralysis - whatever “it is” you fear, which limits your ability to live life to the fullest - Jesus invites us to stop running from it, stop avoiding picking it up, for both running and ignoring our crosses will eventually kill us. Reach down and pick it up - whatever it is. For the man who is paralyzed, his physical cross is his pallet; his spiritual cross is his sins. Pick it up. It is not really as scary once you get your hands on it. And there, right there in the dark fist of your worst fear, is the door to abundant life. “Pick it up, come on with me,” Jesus says, “and I will show you the way to the door.”

I think that the church, our church, is called to bring a hurting world before Jesus, the healer. Our church changes the lives of brothers and sisters/neighbors by bringing the possibility of new life to people.

Pick up your cross, says Jesus, and I will show you the way to the door of new life.