

“A Faith that Will Not Be Denied”

Prelude: After Jesus completed a short tour of the synagogues around Galilee he returns to Capernaum. The news of his coming immediately spreads around town. In Jesus' time, life in Palestine was very public. In the morning the door of the houses were opened and anyone who wished might come and visit. The door was never shut unless a person deliberately wanted privacy. An open door meant an open invitation for all to come in. In humbler homes in Capernaum, such as the one the Jesus is staying in today, there was no entrance hall; the door opened directly on to the street. So in no time, a crowd had filled the house to capacity and jammed the pavement around the door; and they were all eagerly listening to what Jesus had to say. Into this crowd came four friends carrying a man on a stretcher who was paralyzed. As you hear this familiar Gospel lesson, don't become lost in the details of the story, but keep foremost in mind that the text is primarily a witness to God's forgiveness and to Jesus' authority. (read the lesson)

Message: This is a great story, our gospel lesson for today. Of all the bible stories I remember being taught as a child in Sunday school, this is the one I readily recall with ease. Jesus was teaching and the crowd was so great that this poor man's friends had to chop a hole in the roof of the house to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus. I remember thinking it's not nice to rip holes in people's roofs! My Sunday school teacher explained that in Jesus' times, the houses were made out of sticks and mud, so it wasn't all that hard to make a hole in the roof and then to repair it. Still, a hole in the roof is a hole in the roof! Presumably, at least the story implies it, that this is Jesus' own home, but it's not definite. I also remember my class making the house out of clay and sticks and straw, as well as hearing and seeing the story told on a felt board with felt characters. The very thing I warned you about, don't become lost in the details of the story, I found myself easily doing *just that* while preparing this message because the lesson lends itself to visualization and distraction.

However, when I step away from the familiarity of the story and ponder new angles, I noticed something I hadn't considered before: the crowd. The man's friends had to go to all this trouble with the roof because of the crowd. This huge crowd had gathered around Jesus and the house. It was so great a crowd that people couldn't even stand at the front door and hear what he was saying. Jesus was speaking the word to the crowd in the house. They were sitting, standing, listening to Jesus teach and preach. The paralyzed man and his friends couldn't even get in the front door. Either the crowd couldn't or wouldn't step aside, so the man who needed to see Jesus was prevented from doing so.

Now these weren't just any people in the crowd around Jesus. We learn later that the house was full of scribes, people who spent their day studying the scriptures, pouring over the word of God --- professional religious experts. In other words, these scribes are those in the inside, not only on the inside of Jesus' house, but inside the faith. They are in the know. Mark doesn't say they are "bad people;" but in fact, they are probably "good people." They have heard enough of Jesus to want to come inside his house. They are patiently listening to Jesus' words, hoping to gain even more insight into the scriptures they were studying.

In other words, they are just like us. Just like you. We all managed to get out of bed this morning, and despite the cold and other things we have to do today, convinced ourselves to come to church and listen to the Gospel, listen to Jesus teach. Not everyone in town or surrounding area rolled out of bed this morning and went to as much trouble to hear Jesus teach and preach. We are today the insiders, the inner circle, and disciples of the Master. We are good people. And the story says that it was these good, full-time religious, theologically informed, dedicated people --- people just like us --- who quite *unintentionally* kept a person in need from getting to Jesus. Inside the house there are people listening to Jesus. Outside the house there is a paralyzed man in desperate need, and his desperate friends are trying to get him some help ... a man confined forever to his bed ... utterly dependent on his friends to help him get to Jesus ... and they can't get to Jesus because of the crowd, because of the insiders ... because of people like us.

Because of the religious folks crowding around Jesus, there was no way to get in or through the door, so many that day were crowded out from Jesus. So these friends of the man in great need of Jesus had to tear the roof off, knock a hole in Jesus' house. Sad, when you have to tear the roof off Jesus' house to get to Jesus. But sometimes, I think, Jesus' friends have got him so covered up and cut off ... well you have to do what you have to do.

I'm not sure if I've told this story before, but I remember reading about a church, a fine Episcopal congregation that built a beautiful new church on the edge of one of the poorest parts of town. People warned them that might be a good idea, to build such a fine church in that part of town. Sure enough, no sooner was the church built and dedicated to God than one night somebody knocked the lock off the door and broke in. Next morning, they looked around to see what had been taken. Nothing was missing. The locks were repaired, the doors again locked. A week later, the locks were broken

and the door forced open. They could see some muddy footprints up and down the halls of the church but again, after an extensive inventory of the church's belongings nothing was found missing.

Next week the janitor happened to be talking with the priest and mentioned, "You know, of all the places I've worked, this church uses more toilet paper than any place I've ever been. I've had to order more toilet paper twice since ..." And then the priest realized why people were breaking into the church. He stood there with the janitor in the hall saying, "This church doesn't have to go looking for its mission. When people have to break into the church to get toilet paper ... take the lock of the door!"

I meet people all the time who don't want to be around Jesus --- they had a bad experience with church as a child, or they've gone to college, taken a religious course, and now have big doubts, or they simply like to sleep in on Sundays because they've had a hectic work week ... and on and on go the objections. But here is a man in desperate need, with a group of friends who want to help him, and they can't get to Jesus because of the crowd, because of the inner circle studying the Bible with Jesus. Little Zacchaeus had to climb up a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus, so great was the crowd. Now, this poor man had to get his friends to tear the roof off of Jesus' house. Sometimes, though Jesus is inviting and open, sometimes it is not that easy to get near to Jesus.

The year is 1965. I was a senior at college attending a Baptist Church on the edge of the campus property. We had a small college youth fellowship of which I was president. We advertised. An exchange student from Africa responded and I invited her to church. I waited just inside the door in the vestibule. The service started. She was late, but I waited. It was late spring and the doors of the church were opened. I saw her walking quickly up the walk toward the church. She waved. I waved. The elderly deacon at the door saw her ... closed the doors ... and locked them! When people ask me when I felt a call to ministry, I can't identify one single event but I can tell you of *that* moment because in my head I can still hear the click of that lock. At that single moment the world pieced my soul like sharp knife and my faith was cut to the quick! Actually, I've never thought about it until now, but perhaps ... just maybe ... subconsciously ... it's one of the reasons why I never lock the church's doors. There are enough barriers preventing people from coming to Jesus ... locked doors send the wrong message.

As pastor, as someone who has given most of his life to caring for and worrying about the church, I am sad to say, but it's true in my experience: the primary reason that people give me for not following Jesus, for not embracing the Christian faith, is the church ... and since we are the church ... it's us! People can't get to Jesus, can't hear what he is teaching and preaching, can't see the beauty of his way, his truth, his life because of the "institutional" us. We need to own that thought, name and voice those barriers in order to move beyond them to a more sensitive awareness of the people who need Jesus ... people who need to come to Jesus ... people who need his healing touch ... people who need to hear and experience God's love and forgiveness. We need to unlock our hearts, as well as the church doors, and allow people to come into our lives who need to see and feel the Christ within us.

But the story does not end here. The crowd, all clustered about Jesus, nearly defeated the man and his friends --- but not quite. They hack a hole in Jesus' roof, and while the crowd stood there with their mouths open, Jesus healed the man. Jesus miraculously told him to get up and walk and go home healed. In a sense Jesus is saying, "I don't care about the roof. I'm here to heal the sick and raise the dead, not worry about roofing." The astonished crowd with one voice said, "We never saw anything like this!" They never saw a Savior who wanted to reach beyond his inner circle to save. They never knew a Lord who took delight in having his house wrecked in order that people in need might get to him. They never saw a Messiah who reached out to touch lost. They never saw a teacher who demanded that his best students move away from him and let those in greater need get to him. And never have we ever seen or heard or experienced such a loving forgiving God as in the voice and life of Jesus Christ.

It is easy to be in awe ... and to sing the praises of ... a genuine hero or heroine. But not every hero or heroine gets the recognition they deserve. Today's Gospel lesson makes reference to four unsung heroes: the friends who brought the paralytic to Jesus. The late Arthur Ashe, himself a hero for breaking the color barrier in professional tennis ... and for his courage in the face of cancer wrote: *True heroism is ... not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost.* People in need ... people paralyzed and desperate ... people who surround our lives ... perhaps ourselves. It's not fair of us to keep Jesus to ourselves. Our witness of faith needs to punch holes into the sinfulness and injustices of this world and to allow people greater access to Jesus, and Jesus to them. Because someday, we may be that one on the mat ... and then who will carry us to Jesus, if we have not opened the way for others? Amen.