

Carried Together

Mark 2:1-12

Springridge Mennonite Church, Pincher Creek, AB

By: Ryan Dueck

October 20, 2019/ 18th Sunday after Pentecost

I want to begin by saying thank you, on behalf of Lethbridge Mennonite Church, for the invitation to come and worship with you today.

It was Tany who first planted the seed of having a joint service with our two congregations, and I'm very glad that she did. We're really grateful for this opportunity and for your hospitality in welcoming us. We look forward to being able to return the favour some time in 2020.

I'm going to keep my remarks brief this morning. In preparing for this service and talking about the various elements of the service, we agreed that Tany would tell the story of Mark 2:1-12 and then I would have a kind of short devotional/sermon afterward.

Some people in Lethbridge asked if I'd be preaching this Sunday, and I said that I would, but that it would be a shorter sermon than usual. One of my grateful and appreciative congregants (who shall remain nameless) responded, "That's ok, I can sleep through your short ones just as easily as your long ones!"

This is the kind of encouragement that keeps pastors going. 😊

Like all the best stories, the one Tany just told operates on multiple levels. It's actually two stories taking place at the same time.

The first story is a profoundly human story that most of us are naturally and easily drawn into. It's the story of a group of men who are trying to help their friend, who is paralyzed.

They've heard rumours of a healer, stories of lepers being made clean, of the sick being restored to health, of the possessed being freed of evil spirits. They've heard incredible things about this Jesus of Nazareth, and they figure if anyone can help their friend, he can.

So they carry him to where Jesus is. But the crowd is too large. They can't get through. It's impenetrable.

So, they take the long way to Jesus. They dig a hole in the roof and lower their paralyzed friend down to where Jesus is preaching.

Jesus, moved by their faith (and surprised by the spectacle, no doubt), offers forgiveness and healing. The paralyzed man stands up and—incredibly—walks out in full view of anyone.

This story is a heartwarming one with the happiest and most surprising of endings. It's the kind of story that would get a lot of likes and shares on Facebook had there been any smartphones in the house.

It's a story that would have astonished and delighted the adoring crowd—a story that many of us have probably longed to be a part of for most of our lives—irrefutable, public evidence of the power of God!

It's the story of faith in action.

It's interesting to think about whose faith Jesus commends in verse 5. It's not the paralytic, at least not exclusively. It's his friends who had the faith to bring him to Jesus.

This is the first story. And it is a good story.

The second story is a story of controversy.

This story is about power and authority, about who has it, how it is validated, and what it is for.

This story involves primarily Jesus and the teachers of the law. Before he ever summons the paralyzed man to stand up and walk, Jesus pronounces that his "sins are forgiven."

Perhaps this seemed odd to you as you heard Tany tell the story. Forgiveness seems to be the higher priority than healing, for Jesus. It almost sounds like the healing is an afterthought to prove that he can forgive sins.

Which, in this story, it kind of *is*.

It is Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness that initially draws the attention and the ire of the teachers of the law.

This man is a blasphemer! Who does he think he is?! Doesn't he know that God alone has the authority to forgive sins?!

And what they almost certainly *thought*, but didn't *say*: "Doesn't he know that we, the religious scholars and elites, are the gatekeepers and spokesmen for God?"

"We and our systems and rituals and structures are the ones who mediate forgiveness on *behalf* of God!"

"We can't have maverick prophets tramping around Galilee just randomly pronouncing forgiveness! It undermines the whole system!"

Well, Jesus knows the score. He knows what they're thinking.

And so he says, in effect, "Fine, you want me to prove that I have the authority to forgive sin? You want evidence that the authority and purposes and identity of God himself have come among you in me?"

He looks over at the paralyzed man and says, simply, "Get up, take up your mat and go home."

He *doesn't* say, "Get up, take up your mat and go to the *temple*, where your healing can be ratified by the priests," as would have been the custom, as the law required, as Jesus would indeed instruct other people that he healed at other times in his ministry (i.e., one chapter earlier).

He just says, "Go to your home. Carry on your life under the grace and goodness of God."

Jesus is declaring that his authority is displacing the authority of teachers of the law and the religious elites.

He demonstrated this a chapter earlier in the synagogue where he taught *as one having authority, not as the teachers of the law*. This would be a theme of his entire ministry right up to his encounter with Pilate where he is again charged with blasphemy and where he would demonstrate his power in a most unlikely way, upon a Roman cross.

This Jesus has an authority that transcends human custom and institution and grasping after and maintaining power and control. It is an authority whose source is the very character and purposes of God.

This is the second story. And it is a good story.

We've reached the "so what" part of my short sermon today.

What does an inspiring story of a group of friends helping a vulnerable paralyzed man to Jesus the healer... or a controversial story involving religious elites about who has authority and why have to do with us all these years later?

I think there are a few connections that we should make.

First, the story is a reminder of the importance of community. The church is, in a sense, an exercise in "dragging" one another to Jesus.

We all need this in different ways at different times in our lives, I think. Sometimes it is the faith of others that sustains us when we find it impossible or difficult to get to Jesus on our own.

Sometimes it is the faith of our friends that keeps the flame alive, continuing to point the way and reminding us that we, too—no matter what else is true about us, no matter what else we would prefer that Jesus fixed up for us first—are sinners in need of forgiveness.

In a cultural context where so many people are starving for meaning and human connection, where loneliness and addictions of all kinds are becoming epidemic, where many are experiencing what a *New York Times* writer this morning called "a malnutrition of the soul,"¹ this story reminds us of the importance of helping our fellow human beings to the forgiveness, wholeness, restoration, and meaning for life that Jesus offers.

Coming to Jesus is a group effort.

And second, it is a reminder of the power and the authority of Jesus.

Jesus, not the systems we create to manage and package him. Jesus, not the ways in which we reduce him to reflections of our own image, our own politics, our own agendas. Jesus, not the theological systems that we use to describe him and keep him at bay.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/19/opinion/sunday/religion-faith-catholic-pilgrimage.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

Jesus.

Jesus transcends all of this and extends his wounded hands to humanity in a gesture of forgiveness.

He shows us the face of God.

He reveals God's disposition toward sinners like the paralyzed man, like the crowd that gathered in Capernaum on that day, like this gathering of sinners and saints in a country church outside Pincher Creek, AB on October 20, 2019.

And what is this disposition? Love. Of course. Mercy, grace.

May God help you, here at Springridge, and us, back in Lethbridge, to be communities of persistent faith and relentless grace, who stubbornly keep dragging one another back to Jesus, the one who embodies the power and purpose of God, for forgiveness, healing, and hope.

Amen.

