

“Faithful Friends” – Mk 2:1-12

The gospel authors often paint marvelous pictures with just a few words, don't they? Indeed, many passages from the whole of scripture are so graphic that they inspire artists to portray them on canvas. I'm sure many of us can clearly remember dramatic images from Children's bibles or other Sunday School materials. To be sure, most of those pictures were historically and culturally inaccurate (Jesus always had blue eyes, for example!), but the details stand out in my memory, and one of the clearest is a picture of a group of friends sitting around a newly-opened hole in the roof of the house.

But even better than remembering someone else's picture, I would urge you to use your imagination instead. Close your eyes for a moment (that should be safe enough this early in the sermon!) and let yourself down into the text. Mark doesn't give us a weather report, but given that they ripped the roof open, I think we can safely assume it was a sunny and dry day. Feel the sunshine. Feel the heat. Smell the dust, the trees baking in the sun. Smell the shrubs that have been trampled by the crowd as the surging mass of people fills the house, fills the doorway, fills the flowerbeds under the windows, and fills the yard. Smell the crowd, the mass of humanity packed tighter than a SkyTrain car in rush hour.

Experience the sounds. Listen to the solid voice of this wondrous man holding court inside the house. Hear those in front going “shush!” as those in the back of the crowd clamour to know what's happening, what's being said.

Now look beyond the crowd and see the anxious looks on the faces of four people carrying their friend on a litter. Notice as they approach how their expressions change from hopefulness to disappointment as they realize all of their hard work was for nothing – they can't even get close. Watch them halt, discouraged for a moment; and then see their faces light up as they get a unique idea. Observe how they struggle to lift their friend up onto the roof. What in heaven's name could they be trying to accomplish up there?

Peer inside the house where this strange man holds centre stage, intensely engaged in dialogue with the learned men of the district. Back and forth in the dusky interior they discuss the Law and the Prophets. And then suddenly, into this room full of people intensely seeking to discover God, a brilliant ray of light pierces the darkness highlighting the man in the centre of it all in a scene worthy of any Hollywood movie. We could be excused for believing we hear a chorus of angels and see little cherubic creatures, babies with tiny wings, fluttering up and down the ray of heavenly light and circling his head.

But no, it's just a beam of sunshine pouring through a newly-opened gash in the roof. The only things falling down that ray of sunshine are dislodged branches, pieces of mud and tiles, dirt, dust, and possibly one or two sandals dropped in the excitement. And then descending into the room fallen silent in amazed disbelief, right in the midst of this untidy dust cloud from above, is no cherub, but a man. A paralysed man, lying on a homemade stretcher, terrified his over-eager friends will drop him, terrified since he is being lowered, totally helpless, into a crowd of strangers, and important strangers at that. Everything is now totally silent, except for the odd tinkle of tile shards on the floor. It seems like everyone is holding their breath: the friends on the roof, faces now filled with hopeful expectation; the scribes, righteous indignation boiling up at being rudely interrupted; the wide-eyed crowd, waiting in breathless anticipation for the explosive confrontation; and the paralytic man, lying on the cliff-edge of faith, having bet everything on this last throw of the dice. Even Jesus pausing breathless, eyes filled with compassion, moved by the faith of his four friends.

This is the moment I would try to paint, if I could paint, but I know I could never come close to capturing the intensity of that moment in that room, when for an instant it seemed like the universe had stopped. An intense, pregnant silence, that kind of deathly silence just before a storm, the kind of silence you expect will be broken by an earth-shaking thunderclap.

And that's exactly what breaks this momentous silence. A thunderclap that rolls across the centuries and around the whole globe, a thunderclap that starts with the soft and gentle words, "my son, your sins are forgiven". Who would have thought that such a tender and caring phrase could stir up such a storm? Who in that room could ever have believed that Jesus uttering these few words of divine compassion would start an explosion of controversy and fear and hatred that would eventually culminate with his gruesome execution on a cross?

But the dark storm clouds did instantly begin to gather in that very room, rumbling in the hearts of the very people who through their lifelong study of the scriptures should have been instead the first to recognize the presence and the power of God in that room, in that man who spoke those gentle, healing words. Where the other faces in the room moved from expressions of anticipation to amazement and awe, the faces of the scribes turned to deep scowls, reflecting the icy grip of fear upon their hearts. Only God could speak the words that this man had uttered, and so only two possibilities offered themselves: the unthinkable possibility that this man actually had the power and authority of God to make such a statement, and the only possible conclusion that he was blaspheming, trespassing upon the holy ground of God's authority.

He did not speak a righteous prayer that the man be healed, neither did he call upon God to act. His was the most blatant form of blasphemy. He didn't just declare the man to be healed in body – that would be bad enough – claiming the power of a prophet. Instead, boldly, even if quietly, this compelling man uttered the ultimate blasphemy, claiming the whole power of God in declaring that the man was healed in spirit, cleansed of sin.

And he wasn't even nervous about trespassing on God's turf, because before the words are even out of the mouths of the scribes, this man challenges their unbelief, and thus their faith. "Why do you question thus in your hearts?" he asks them. And then, in a moment of epiphany and revelation, Jesus rips open the roof of heaven, and fills the room with the light of the Spirit of God. "Rise, take up your pallet, and go home" he says to the previously paralysed man, who does just that. Getting up, picking up his pallet, he walks out of the house and through the assembled crowd, walking proof that this Jesus had the power to heal both body and soul.

And all were amazed. I guess so! Nobody had ever seen such a thing before. Faces now hung with slack jaws, speechless, in amazed silence, they watched this man, carried to the house by his friends now walk away, living proof of the power of God at work in this Jesus. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes", they would later tell family and friends who hadn't been there.

The reaction of the scribes was less charitable. Instead of inspired by such a demonstration of God's power at work in Jesus, they were threatened by him, and by what he had to say. The controversy between the scribes and Pharisees and Jesus grew from that first confrontation, fueled by Jesus' challenges ("you say, but I tell you ...") and by their digging in their righteous heels. A controversy that would eventually lead to the death of Jesus on the cross. I sometimes wonder if the paralysed man who was healed walked to the hillside execution site, whether he was part of the crowd watching Jesus die. I like to think that he was 'one of the many' who were able to encounter Jesus risen victorious from death a few days later – I have no evidence, of course, but it seems like a nice way for the story to end. I like to think that that healed man would have used his new mobility to follow Jesus, continuing to act as walking proof

of the power of God at work in Jesus, confirming him as the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ. The man, no longer paralysed by either sin or disease, healed in body and in spirit, able to proclaim with his life the grace and mercy of God abundantly at work in the Son of Man, the Son of God.

But we don't know how the story ended, because the story didn't really end, did it? Countless people over the ages since the ripping open of that roof have been healed in both body and spirit by that same gentle Jesus, able and willing to proclaim to all, "your sins are forgiven". No longer are we paralysed, frozen into inaction by the burden of our weaknesses, our failures, our sins. Able to rise up, to carry our own pallets, we are instructed by Christ to walk out into the world, through the amazed crowds, proclaiming the healing power of God given to us by Christ. We are called and instructed to go forth in our lives as walking proof of God's mercy, forgiveness and love.

And lest we make the mistake of falling into the trap of thinking that the healing was a result of the paralytic man's faith, we need to note the careful detail in the gospel text. "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Not his faith, but their faith. Why is it so important to note that crucial difference? Because in those times of weakness and darkness when we are seeking healing, it is all too easy for us to beat up on ourselves, blaming ourselves for a lack of or merely insufficient faith. The paralytic man was healed because Jesus saw the faith of his friends. How then are we to act? What then can we learn from this event about our own role in faith?

Our role, especially in the light of our faith in Christ, is to act like one of those four faithful friends, extending ourselves, offering to carry to Christ anyone who is unable to walk to Him themselves. As faithful friends we can throw open the doors of our church so that nobody has to dig down through the roof.

There is in this story of the demonstration of Jesus' divine power another subtle but important message that barriers limiting access to Jesus, whether they be physical barriers or the more subtle barriers of exclusion and rejection, need to be and can be overcome with the help of friends of faith. Since we are people with faith in God's healing power in Christ, we are those very friends who are being called upon to carry others to Christ. We are now the faithful friends called to help others overcome any barriers in their attempt to approach Christ, and receive his healing power for themselves. May God grant us the strength to carry out our witness to Christ.