

And He Saw Their Faith

Mark 2:1-12

February 14, 2021

This next week as we enter into Lent we will be examining the form of faith called *beliefs*, the faith that form in the mind and can be expressed in words. The theme of the season is Beliefs that Undergird Life: Shaping Your Own *Credo* (or “I Believe”). What are those beliefs that help us in the living of our lives? What are your most important personal beliefs?

Today we examine another form of faith, faith that can be *seen*, faith in action. The key line is in verse 5: “*And when Jesus saw their faith.*” That is, the faith of the four friends who hauled their paralyzed friend on a cot to see Jesus.

I

The story is one of our favorites. Jesus is at Peter’s house in Capernaum, and Jesus is teaching. It was “standing room only”, the

room so packed that there was no room for any more, even at the door.

Now came the four guys carrying their friend to Jesus that he might be healed. Sometimes we cannot get to Jesus on our own; we are carried there, brought there, led there. Here is faith in the form of friendship, a highly underrated form of faith. Here is the *gospel as friendship*. Wendell Berry calls it “the Membership”, where we are members of one another—which we all are whether we know it or not.

When they got to Peter’s house the house was so jammed they could not even get in the door. So they improvised! One said, “Up to the roof!”, and the other’s followed. They carried their probably bewildered friend up the outside staircase to the flat roof. You may remember, I do, in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, making a model of this house with the outside staircase.

When they go to the top of the roof they began to tear a hole in the roof so they could let their friend down through they hole into the presence of Jesus. So here came the chinks of clay, sticks, mud and straw raining down on the people in the room, a holy “breaking and entering.”

Imagine Jesus sitting, trying to teach. First, he heard the scurrying on the roof, then came the bits of clay, sticks, mud and straw. Peter meanwhile was going on in his head trying to remember the fine print of his home owner’s insurance policy. What could this go under? “Act of God?”

Imagine the commotion in the crowd as they saw the paralyzed man being lowered on the pallet into the room. Here was Jesus and here was the man lowered from the roof in front of him. And now the key verse: “And when Jesus saw their faith....”

He didn’t *hear* this faith, he *saw* it. Faith as faith-filled action. Years later James the brother of Jesus would write: “Faith without

works is dead.” Then he would go on to say, “Some say, You take the faith part and I’ll take the works part.” (See James 2:17-18) No, faith and works are always of the same cloth, two sides of the same coin.

And, of course, it was *their* faith he saw. Not the faith of the man on the cot but the faith of the *friends*. *Faith on behalf of another, therefore faith as love*. Sometimes when we come to church we are low on faith, but we see the faith of others, faith that brought them to church, faith in their voices as they sing, faith on their faces, faith you can see. And their faith begins to kindle your own. “Can I borrow a little of your faith today? I’m a little low.” “Yes, have all you need.” Sometimes faith is contagious. We “catch” faith from others.

Here is faith, not as a set of beliefs, or as a recitation of a creed, but as carrying your friend to see Jesus, faith as hope that Jesus might heal him, faith as love set in motion.

Who have been the four friends in your life? Who have carried you when you could not walk? Who have gotten you where you needed to go. Who have been there for you when you felt paralyzed or hopeless or confused. Who have picked you up and dusted you of, squared your shoulders and helped you walk into the day? Give thanks for them today.

III

Now when Jesus saw their faith, again, not the man's faith—he may have almost given up hope and faith by now—but their faith, he set the healing in motion. He said to the man: “Your sins are forgiven!” The man may have thought “I thank you that, but that's not why I'm here.” But maybe he needed to believe in the forgiveness of sins. First.

I think we all need to believe in that. When illness strikes or bad fortune we may feel “I deserve this.” I messed up, I deserve

this.” So we need first, more than anything, to believe in the forgiveness of sins.

In my first year at Myer’s Park Baptist Church I was preaching on “The Forgiveness of Sins.” I decided at part of the service to have the congregation say together The Apostle’s Creed—because of the portion that says, “I believe in...the forgiveness of sins.”

Well, that next week I heard about it! Someone slipped a note under my door that said: “We are Baptists! We don’t have creeds!” Someone told me, “The reason I came to this church was so I wouldn’t have to say creeds!”

So there we were in worship that Sunday reciting the Apostles’ Creed. Some bailed out at the title, The Apostles’ Creed. Some bailed at “I Believe”, others bailed out at “the Virgin Mary.” By the time we got to “suffered under Pontius Pilate, some began to feel woozy. Others bailed out at “he descended into hell.” By the time we

finally go to “the forgiveness of sins”, there was no joy in Mudville. I had struck out.

But here’s the point, for me, about this moment in the story. We need to believe in the forgiveness of sins, for our own healing and wholeness. The man on the cot did. We do too.

IV

Now come the theologians in the crowd, the theological council observing from the sidelines, the protectors of the faith. “This is blasphemy”, they said to themselves, “only God can forgive sins!” Jesus wasn’t following protocol. He was presuming to take God’s place. Some people care more about correct theology than about people getting help.

Jesus read their faces; he knew their hearts. The scribes couldn’t see whether the man’s sins were forgiven, but they would see the man healed of his paralysis. So Jesus turned to the man and finished the healing.

He said, “Rise, take up your pallet and walk!” When the man heard these words he got off the pallet and walked! If he had no faith when his friends carried him to Jesus he did now! Faith to lift your legs over the side of the cot, faith to lower your feet to the ground, faith to put weight on your wobbly legs, faith to walk.

As the man got up and walked around the room, the crowd was as the text says, “amazed.” And they said, “We’ve never seen anything like this.” The theologians in the crowd may not have been too pleased, but the man was healed and that was all that mattered.

V

Here is faith that is seen. Who of you have been encouraged in your own faith by faith that was seen?

Beliefs are important. There are bad beliefs that can cripple us and harm others. There are inadequate beliefs that no longer bring life. But faith is more than beliefs. At its deepest level it is *trust*. Faith, says Karen Armstrong, has to do with things like *trust*,

confidence, loyalty, engagement. Here is faith that joins body, mind and spirit, faith *embodied*. This is what we've seen today in the four friends.

One of America's great spiritual leaders in the last century was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, across the street from Union Theological Seminary where I went to school. I could see him from time to time walking down the street.

When Martin Luther King sent out the call and asked people from around the country to join him in a Civil Rights march, Heschel was there right by his side. You can see it in the photos. Some of his Jewish peers criticized him for leaving his classroom and his prayers. He responded, "My legs were praying."

Sometimes we pray with our legs. Sometimes we say our creeds with our hands and feet. Habitat For Humanity, as you know, builds hundreds of houses across the county with volunteers, so

people who could never afford a house can have their own home. They call it “the Theology of the Hammer.” We might call it the “Theology of the Helping Hand.”

Some make a distinction between “orthodoxy”, straight or right belief, and “orthopraxy” straight or right practices or action. Some try to be the “orthodontists” of our faith. Some times the so-called “heretics” are closer to the heart of Jesus and the way of Jesus than those who write and police our theology. In the Christian faith there is no right theology that doesn’t lead to right action.

When Jesus saw their faith I think he smiled, at least to himself. I think he smiles every time there is faith he can see. Ours too.