

BELIEVING IS SEEING

Mark 2: 1-12

In my former congregation, the church building was attached to an apartment complex. The complex was built in the early 1990s when the provincial government was into building affordable housing in partnership with charities like churches that had property available for such construction. St. Mark's Court in the area of Don Mills, Toronto, is a 70 unit, four story building which has mixed housing. 1/3 of the units are government subsidized, 1/3 are at market rent as low as the city allows, and 1/3 are special units designed for people in wheelchairs needing accessibility and mobility throughout their unit. From the kitchens to the washrooms, to automated doors and wider hallways, the goal is for people to have as much independence as possible so that what others consider a disability is no disability at all.

But it's one thing to have all the external support and it's another to internalize a freedom from the disability label. What does it mean to be abled or disabled? How independent are any of us? How dependent are we? Do we see our dependence as a disability? Do we prize our independence as something to be proud of or as a privilege that we can never take for granted however it comes? The truth is, we all have need. We need things for our bodies, our minds and our hearts. But is our need something to be ashamed of or is it something we recognize as a gift we human beings have to share with others inviting them to give and to share as they are able?

In my 19 years in the congregation I learned a lot from folks of all ages who came to the church and participated in many of our groups and events. Some of these folks were what we have traditionally called: "disabled." Are we not all differently abled? Anyhow, I'll use the term disabled for the purposes of the sermon.

There were two members of the congregation, for example. Call them: Bobby and Amara. They taught me a lot about what it means to be able. Bobby suffered from a declining condition called: Muscular Dystrophy, and this would lead to an early death. But even as he had become bound to a wheelchair, he went everywhere – restaurants, movie theatres, festivals and various events, on buses and planes. He played sports like wheelchair hockey and even skied. He was an advocate for others but also a wonderful volunteer welcomer at church and a Christian Education assistant giving the children rides on his chair. If you didn't know the condition he was suffering you would see Bobby as a young man living richer a life than most young adults live.

And then there was Amara, a woman who had been paralyzed after being struck by a drunk driver. But having past the anger and grief, and having found her way to acceptance and even forgiveness, she lived in one of our larger 3-bedroom apartments. She was a mom not only to

her three children but to other children in the neighbourhood who would be over at the apartment all the time. She cooked for them and made them all kinds of treats, went out and about with friends, offered advice and pastoral care to so many in our community who saw her embrace of life in the face of what she had suffered as so empowering. People received so much courage and hope from Amara in tackling their own struggles of life.

So the question: what is a disability and what is an ability? How can something that appears to be a disability actually become an ability we didn't realise existed until we experienced it or saw it firsthand? Let's explore such questions as we dive into our scripture reading this morning.

On the surface, this is another one of many stories of healing Jesus performs. But the reason each and every healing story is in the bible is because of what Jesus sees that draws forth healing energy from him. What do we know about the man who is brought to Jesus? Very deliberately, he is identified as a "paralytic." Beyond anything about him as a human being and beyond anything about his personality, his spirit, his hopes and dreams, his relationships and so forth, the man is identified by his sickness or "disability." That's how society sees him and that's how the people around Jesus see him too. Whatever healing he may come to receive from Jesus may be about his physical paralysis. And yet, what is it that Jesus sees in the man beyond his physical condition?

First of all, Jesus sees the man's friends who have brought him to Jesus. And not only that. Jesus sees their persistent determination in getting him seen by Jesus. Even though there's a huge lineup and a crowd blocking any access to Jesus, they climb up on the roof of Jesus' house and tear open the roof to lower him down. Can you imagine the kind of effort that would take? Can you imagine the boldness and the audacity? Can you imagine the desperation even. Are they that confident in their faith in what Jesus can do? Are they that committed and bound by active love for their friend that they'll do whatever it takes?

We're told that Jesus sees "their faith" before addressing the man himself. Traditionally, this story has been seen as a wonderful example of what's called: "vicarious faith." That is, sometimes other people believe for us and this empowers us to believe ourselves. How wonderfully powerful and beneficial it is for others to believe for us and in us!

But there's still something else that Jesus sees that has too often been missed. Why is it that others may have faith in us and for us? Is it that something in us draws them out too? Is it that they see the possibility of faith in us and even the seed of faith in us that motivates them to believe in and for us? Are they a mirror for us to see ourselves in a way we may not have seen ourselves before? You believe for me and in me. You believe I can be healed. Do I see that power of healing in myself through your eyes too? Jesus sees their faith and then looks at the man. He sees him through their eyes and recognizes the power of healing that can be drawn forth in the man.

But what kind of healing is it the man needs? Is it simply something physical? Or is the physical healing also a reflection of something more internal that may liberate the healing power in the man? Without even interviewing him, Jesus sees the faith of four friends and then tells the man this: "Child, your sins are forgiven." Whatever shame or guilt or socially inbred complicity for his illness imposed on him blaming him for his condition of paralysis, Jesus wants to liberate the spirit in him to fly up and soar. It is only after the declaration of forgiveness that he also challenges the man to stand up, take up his mat and walk home. Whatever situation in his life, his environment or social stigma may have contributed to his chronic ailment of paralysis, the man needed internal spiritual and mental liberation before his body could also respond.

Jesus saw what was possible in the man through the eyes of his friends. Jesus responded to this faith with his bold words. The man had to believe before he could even try to stand up. He had to be free inside and visualize his rising up before he could see himself no longer as a disabled or paralyzed man.

Wow, ok, so what are we to take from this story? Well, there are many things for sure. There is the recognition of the power we have for one another of being faith and seeing faith in each other. There is also the power of each of us seeing ourselves through the faith of others in us as a mirror into ourselves. This is powerful. But what about our inner release? What about that freedom from the chains of how we have lost faith in ourselves because of how others have seen us through our brokenness rather than through our power to be whole?

Well, but this brings us to a final question. Who is disabled in this story? Is it the man labeled "paralyzed"? Or is it the crowd around him who, unlike his friends, see him as disabled and afflicted in body and soul? How may we who believe we are not disabled actually be disabled because we don't see as we think we see? How may we ourselves need forgiveness for our blindness in not seeing others past what we see as their brokenness of body, mind or soul?

Well, to help us think and feel our way to an answer, let me share a story shared with me by a member of our congregation, with permission. I have changed the names of course. Jill and Brenda are both women in their senior years. They met at an exercise class aimed at people with various abilities and disabilities. While Jill is quite able-bodied, Brenda is in a wheelchair. But the amazing thing is that the wheelchair does not inhibit Brenda from doing what she can with exercise and other things besides. The two women hit it off right away. One day, Brenda invited Jill to consider working with her on a new activity and a more complicated one. It involved wood working. As they got together to volunteer and paint beautiful items produced from wood and sell them for charity, they imagined building these items themselves.

But doing this was complicated. It involved not only the physical effort and skill of laser cutting the wood, but also putting the pieces together and then through a computer program setting

up a 3-D printing process. Jill had some obvious doubts as to whether she could do this, and Brenda? What could she do given her disability? She couldn't do any of the physical work. And yet, not only did Brenda have no hesitation taking this on, but she believed they could very well make something beautiful together. Brenda believed for Jill as well as herself.

And so, after much learning through an instructor in terms of the physical cutting and the computer programming, Jill and Brenda produced some beautiful woodwork together. But for Jill, the learning went far beyond the actual production of the physical objects. She realized how much she had initially seen Brenda through her physical disability; so much so, that she could never have imagined her incredible ability. And in fact, because of her physical disability her mental abilities of creative intelligence and her spiritual ability of having such faith and hope in what was possible, made her such a great teacher for Jill too. Jill began to see in Brenda a whole different person. She was released and forgiven whatever doubt and questioning she may have had at the beginning. Both women were empowered to rise up into new faith and hope in what they could do themselves and together.

Isn't this remarkable? And it's all about what we see and what we fail to see in each other because we lack faith. We need inner forgiveness and release, so that we see as Jesus sees and as God sees each of us and others through us too. How may we be given such eyes to see others and see ourselves too through the faith God has in us?

May we here as a communion of faith and a fellowship of Christ's body see each other as God sees each of us, and may we not get stuck in what's on the surface. As Brenda taught Jill to see more clearly, Amara and Bobby helped me see more clearly too. We experienced forgiveness and were called to take up our mat, get up and walk home.

What about you? What are you being called to see more clearly in someone else but also in yourself?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit of Jesus, clear our eyes, open our hearts, and give us new vision of faith... Amen.