10-4-2020 Sermon “Making Room”

Watching sporting events without fans in the stands is kind of strange. When baseball first restarted I thought it seemed silly when, in the stadiums, they piped fan noises into what would otherwise be a silent venue. Some places even inserted digital images of people in the stands that, while the viewing audience could see them, they were certainly not visible to the players. I enjoy watching Formula One and Indy Car racing and the absence of fans there is kind of a moot point, if not a mute point, because the drivers certainly can’t hear a cheering crowd over the sounds of their engines anyway. With golf, though, it’s a mixed bag. Seeing the best golfers in the world walking a championship course without fans lining the ropes, without loud cheers when a favorite player hits an amazing shot, or without packed grandstands surrounding the final green waiting to explode when the winning putt drops in makes much of the event seem anticlimactic. Some golfers, in fact, feed off the cheers and the jeers that come with having fans around the course.

At the same time, I for one don’t miss hearing inebriated fans screaming “in the hole,” or “you’re the man,” or worst of all, “mashed potatoes” when a golfer hits their drive! Seriously? “Mashed potatoes?” At some tournaments it’s hard to tell from the fans whether you’re watching golf or a professional wrestling match. So, while some may differ, I don’t mind at all not having loud galleries at golf matches. Some people, though, will not be denied.

A couple of weeks ago I was watching the U.S. Open Golf Tournament, where no spectators were allowed on the course. Every once in a while, though, when a player made a particularly good shot, you would hear a chorus of cheers come from seemingly nowhere. The broadcasters pointed out that at some places along the course, which was situated in a residential neighborhood and surrounded by homes, fans had erected grandstands, tree houses, or other structures in their yards in order to see over the fence surrounding the course and catch a glimpse of at least part of a hole, a green, or a tee box. Not unlike the Chicago Cubs fans who live in the apartment building across the street from Wrigley Field and have built seating on the roof of the building, or the OSU students who live in the towers next to Ohio Stadium and watch games out their dorm room windows, some people will not be denied.

Our story from Luke’s Gospel today, which was originally presented in Mark, is also about people who would not be denied. Jesus is teaching in a house in Capernaum and had drawn a pretty big crowd - so big, in fact, that people can’t get to the door. Some men, hoping to bring their friend who suffers from paralysis to see Jesus, upon finding their entrance blocked by the masses, move to the roof and proceed to gain entry by removing part of the roof and lowering the man on his mat down through the hole in front of Jesus. And the passage says, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’”

Now, some sermons on this passage would go on to talk about the conflict that ensues among Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees who are present about whether Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. I have gone that way with this scripture before but that’s not where we’re going today. Others might deal with the idea that is suggested that this person’s paralysis is linked to his sin, a common idea in that time but one that in other places Jesus dismisses as not being the case at all. But that’s not where I want to take us either. I want to focus on these friends and what Luke says about them.

When they’ve lowered the man on his mat down through the roof and Jesus sees this, his initial reaction is not to the condition of the man, but to the faith of the friends. “When he saw **their** faith…” it says - not the faith of the man but the faith of the friends. It was **their** faith that led to the healing that took place, not anything to do with the faith or lack of faith of the man on the cot who had been forgiven and healed as a result.

And it is not unusual in the healing stories of Jesus for a person to be healed regardless of whether they were a person of faith or not. There are many stories where Jesus tells the person healed that “your faith has made you well,” while in others no mention is made of the person’s faith or lack thereof. In this story, however, the faith of the friends is not only mentioned by Jesus, it is **exhibited** in the actions of the men who literally broke through a barrier in order to bring their friend to Jesus. These friends put their faith into action on behalf of the one who was excluded by the barriers of his health, the crowd, and the roof.

As we have been digging in to the idea of how to create new places for new people in the church in general and at Church of the Master in particular we have to consider what are the barriers that keep people on the outside, that exclude? How do we make room in our lives, how do we make room in our faith community, even in our building to create new places for new people? What barriers must be broken through or broken down in order for people who are “out there” to feel welcome “in here?” What obstacles moved out of the way? And what has to happen within our own faith for us “in here” to be willing to open the doors, to tear down the walls for those who are “out there?” Let’s let that sit there for a moment…

Did you ever wonder how the man who was lowered through the roof to meet and be healed by Jesus reacted to that experience? We never hear. In the passage, he never speaks and as soon as he walks out the door mat in hand the story turns to the conflict between Jesus and the authorities. But what do you think the conversation between the friends was like on the way home? I imagine it had to have been one of celebration among all of them that their friend could now walk - what a difference that was going to make in his life and, assumedly, in the lives of his family as well. There had to be the first century equivalent of high fives all around, maybe even an Aramaic “you’re the man!” although, thankfully, probably no cries of “mashed potatoes!” But the gratitude that the man had to have for his friends must have been overwhelming. And unless we’ve been in a situation where we received some miraculous healing, or have been the recipient of some extremely generous gift or invitation, we may not be able to imagine the depth of feelings that were shared that day.

But let’s play “what if” with this story for a moment. What if the friends, when they saw the crowd around the house where Jesus was teaching, had simply turned around and gone back home, not wanting to deal with the crowd, not willing to wait until the crowd thinned and maybe, maybe, Jesus came out? What then? I wonder how they came up with the idea of going up on the roof and digging through, because that involved some radical thinking? This whole first part of this story involves all kinds of faith, and action, and commitment. And this story asks of us, do we have that kind of faith and commitment? Because there are people in our community, not unlike the man on the mat, who need the healing that can come from meeting Jesus. They may not be dealing with paralysis, but they could be dealing with some kind of physical or emotional, economic, spiritual or status oriented disadvantage that prevents them from being in a community like this. How do we make **them** feel welcome here? What could we do?

Here’s just a thought that struck me recently; have you noticed that in our sanctuary the only spaces that will accommodate a wheelchair are all in the back of the room? How welcoming is that? How hard could it be, really, to make room for wheel chairs in other parts of our sanctuary? We provide devices to help those with hearing impairments, we put the worship liturgy on the screens in part to assist those with vision impairments, we have a lift to aid those who can’t do stairs, why would we not break down this barrier as well? Or what about people who are dealing with fear, hate, or bigotry? How hard would it be to make room for them? Can you sense the fear and the anger and the paralysis that blankets our society today? From parents concerned about how to keep their kids safe in school, to Black parents concerned about how to keep their kids safe on the streets, to people who are scared and angry about issues pertaining to the election, the economy, their jobs, or any number of issues, people are looking for someone, some thing they can believe in, that they can trust in, something in which they can place their hope, their health, their safety, even their lives. Is there some way that our community, our Church of the Master family could, like the friends in our story today, help break through the barriers in our society for these people and make room for them? Our belief is that God is present in all things at all times, and that Jesus shows us what that looks like. And while I’m not always sure of a lot of things, I am sure of this: folks who are living in these kinds of fear and who don’t have a faith or a faith community on which to rest are not going to find their answer on a ballot or in an election or in something they can buy on Amazon. It requires relationship.

From where does our strength come, the psalmist asks? It comes from the Lord, whose steadfast love endures forever. That is at the core of our faith, that God is with us in all things at all times, that like those faithful friends in Luke’s Gospel today, God will not allow any barriers to separate us from God. And those people “out there,” those who don’t have a faith community like we do, those who are paralyzed by fear of whatever, they need faithful friends to bring them, to carry them if necessary, to a place where the faith of others can lift them up until they’re able to lift themselves. It is the role, the calling of the church to be those friends, to do that outreach, to break down those barriers, to tear down those walls and dig through those roofs, even to move a few pews if necessary, in order to make room for those who need to meet Jesus in whatever form that takes. There’s not a person in this church family who has not been invited - even carried at times - to meet Jesus in whatever way was needed in that moment. The challenge to us from our passage today is to see the need that is right in front of us and to be willing to meet that need with a roof-shattering, not-to-be-denied, kind of faith. Maybe that takes the form of an invitation to church, or maybe it’s just an invitation to coffee. Your job as a disciple and apostle is not to “save” people - we have a Savior already, thank you very much - your job is to be a friend, to create relationship. We shared with our confirmation youth last week that being a disciple of Jesus Christ, that taking those vows in our baptism and membership liturgy, should make a noticeable difference in our lives. That message doesn’t apply only to our youth, it’s a message for all of us. How will **you** make room in your lives, your personal lives and your faith lives, in your personal family and your church family, in your family home and your church home, for the new people who need to know and experience the faith that you have, that has been shared with and for you? Who are you willing to come alongside and carry so that they can experience the love that you have received in your faith? What accommodations are we willing to make in our building, in our ministries, in our worship in order to welcome those who otherwise might not be here? We don’t know what kind of faith the man on the mat had, but the faith of his friends was abundantly clear, wasn’t it? That’s what God calls us to consider in our passage for today. That’s **how** God challenges us to be.

So this week, may you be a friend to the friendless.

And may your faith be faith for the faithless.

And may the steadfast love of God that endures within you be made known through the ways in which you break down barriers in order to make room for new people in the new places we create. Amen.