

Carried by the Community

Mark 2:1-12

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 12) 2023

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*“There are four things that lead to wisdom. You ready for them?” She nodded, wondering when the police work would begin.*

*“They are four sentences we learn to say, and mean” Gamache held up his hand as a fist and raised a finger with each point. “I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. I was wrong.”*

*-Still Life, by Louise Penny*

You've heard me say that I'm a fan of detective fiction both in book form and on the screen. I'm a relatively new fan of the Canadian detective series *Three Pines*, by author Louise Penny, with Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, a good man in the best sense. The eighteen books of the series are mostly set in the fictional small, Canadian village of Three Pines in the province of Quebec and tend to be “character driven” rather than “plot driven.” In other words, they are all about getting to know the interesting and sometimes peculiar people in this small town, their sense of community, their sharing meals together, their hanging out together, their backstories, their conversations, and common life, while a crime is eventually solved. Author Louise Penny said, her books are “about love and friendship. About belonging and hope. And finding kindness buried. In the wilderness. In the marrow.”

Which is why I think it is interesting that the TV series *Three Pines*, on Prime, focuses on Inspector Gamache and not the community of Three Pines. I admire Gamache, that's not the issue. The issue is I think is that it's hard for TV and movie screens to portray community. It's hard to show in 90 minutes, or even

in a series of episodes, people being friends and nurturing community over dinners and showing up for committee meetings, showing up and planning events, putting up flyers around town, typing up mailing lists, networking, and all the mundane things a community that is trying to make a difference for good does to make a difference for good. It's difficult to show friendship over a long time, which is what real friendship, relationship, and community are about. And real friendship, relationship, and community is what the Gamache detective series of books are about.

What's easier to show on screen is the single great effort of the lone hero, which is probably why the TV series focuses on Gamache. We tend to like the solo action, the singular event on screen. On screen we tend to get an explosion instead of a committee meeting, the big shootout instead of negotiation, and the action-packed car chase rather than the riveting account of people talking and listening and learning to trust each other. We get competition not cooperation.

Author Rebecca Solnit says, "Positive social change results mostly from connecting more deeply to the people around you than rising above them, from coordinated rather than solo action. Among the virtues that matter are those traditionally considered feminine rather than masculine, more nerd than jock: listening, respect, patience, negotiation, strategic planning, storytelling. But we like our lone and exceptional heroes, and the drama of violence and virtue of muscle, or at least that's what we get, over and over, and in the course of getting them we don't get much of a picture of how change happens and what our role in it might be, or how ordinary people matter" (from "When the Hero is the Problem," Aug. 2, 2019, *Literary Hub*).

How ordinary people matter and how community brings about change is what today's Scripture reading is about. I'm departing from the lectionary to return to this story from Mark 2, which is one of my benchmark gospel stories. Reading this many years ago opened my eyes to a whole new world and it was something like a thunderclap when this congregation first heard this same reading thirty-three years ago. With that in mind, with our own church community tattered and battered, fragmented, and exhausted after Covid and the isolation of the lockdown, with broken friendships and broken marriages. As someone told me earlier this week, "I just don't get out much anymore. I just stay home." Therefore, I thought it might be important to return to this story.

Here, Mark tells us that Jesus returns to Capernaum, which has become his home. Word spreads fast that he's home, so people come from far and wide to hear him. So many come that the house is packed and no one else can get in. People are standing outside the windows and out in the yard trying to hear a bit of what Jesus is saying. Showing up are four friends, who are carrying their fifth friend on pallet because Mark says the man is paralyzed. They can't get through the crowd into the house, but instead of giving up, they are determined, and thinking outside the box, they decide to go up on the roof, dig through the dried mud and wood and thatching, and then they lower their paralyzed friend down on the pallet in front of Jesus.

Verse 5 is the thunderclap heard here thirty-three years ago and the verse that changed the way I see some forty years ago: "When Jesus saw *their* faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, *your* sins are forgiven.'" In other words, this paralyzed man's salvation was mediated through the faith of his four friends. Salvation is not done in autonomy or isolation. It is communal and our faith is connected in and through one another. This is a big deal! Especially to people who were raised S.

Baptist and evangelical and who believed that everything revolved around the sacredness of the individual's agency in receiving forgiveness and being saved.

While all of this was going on, nearby the Religious Authorities were observing and critiquing Jesus' theology. "Who does Jesus think he is?! Only God can forgive sins!" (v. 7). Jesus picked up on what was going on and said, "Heh, fellows, which is easier to do? Say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?' But since you're all worried about forgiveness of sin..." Mark says Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Take up your mat and go home." Mark says, the man stood and "immediately" (Mark's favorite word) took his mat and went out before everyone. Mark adds, "Everyone was amazed and glorified God saying, 'We've never seen anything like this before!'"

We did this story for Children's Sabbath years ago, when Drew Watson was in elementary school and the kids acted this story as a skit. Drew played the paralyzed man and here, at the climax, she stood up from her mat and turned cartwheels all the way up the aisle. We all gasped, "We've never seen anything like this before!"

In the Christian faith, the faith of being disciples of Jesus, we're in it together. The essence of sin is estrangement – from God, from each other, and from this creation. We are broken, isolated, disconnected, and disintegrated. Furthermore, by ourselves we can't do anything about it. We are paralyzed in our sin and stuck in our addiction to isolation sitting on the couch at home and can't get up and get to Jesus. We need the community of friends (which is what Augustine called the church) to show up and help carry us to Jesus. Furthermore, we are always being carried by the community or helping carry someone else.

There are times when we are exhausted in our faith, depressed, and discouraged, when we are broken and isolated and the community of friends in Christ goes and gets you and puts you on a pallet and carries you to Jesus. At other times, perhaps your faith is at a better place, and you end up being one of those friends carrying someone else to Jesus. The truth is, most of the time, these two things are always going on at the same time. We are carrying others and we are being carried.

This is why showing up is one of the first and most basic tasks of being a disciple of Jesus. We show up not simply because we think we might receive something encouraging or inspiring at church. We show up because someone else might need us to be there to help carry them to Christ. We show up because someone might need a pat on the back, a hug, someone to listen to them, or someone to stand beside them. It's why we all sing the hymns. It's not about whether we're good singers or not or whether we feel like singing or not. We sing because it's about God and our singing might encourage someone else. Folks, it's not about you! It's about carrying each other to Jesus! So, you show up. You sing. You participate.

It's why we eat together at Potluck dinners. It's not about the meal itself. And it's not about what we eat. It does not matter if we're eating pimento cheese or chicken salad sandwiches, when we eat together in the presence of Jesus, it is a holy sacrament, in which and through which the living Christ works, healing us of the toxicity of isolation and being estranged from God, from each other, and from God's creation. But you have to show up and be here. We participate – together. It is why we share coffee time together after worship, volunteer together, give each other rides, pray for one another, pray with one another, drink coffee together, and take deep counsel with one another.

And it is why we confess to one another – in Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together* believed that confessing to one another, receiving forgiveness from one another, and praying with one another is the very heart of being the church. It is the essence and lifeblood of carrying one another to Jesus.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the priest represents Christ and Christ's church in his person, so he receives confession and pronounces forgiveness. But in our tradition, we are the body of Christ together. Therefore, we go to one another and confess our sins and our failures and pray for and with one another. We do not necessarily need to stand up in front of the whole congregation, but we do need to be able to sit down, maybe over coffee, with one or two or perhaps four of our most trustworthy friends and confess and receive forgiveness. It is how we are carried by the community. It is how the poison of isolation and estrangement is healed.

Early in Louise Penny's first Inspector Gamache novel, *Still Life*, Gamache is mentoring a young policewoman. He says, "There are four things that lead to wisdom. You ready for them?" She nodded, wondering when the police work would begin."

"They are four sentences we learn to say, and mean," Gamache held up his hand as a fist and raised a finger with each point. "I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. I was wrong."

This bit of wisdom is repeated in everyone of Louise Penny's books.

I suggest that these are also four sentences we learn to say and mean to one another. They are all rooted in the New Testament, and they are keys to being faithful disciples and being the church.

- (1) I don't know. In other words, we practice humility and learn to be honest about our own ignorance – what we don't know.
- (2) I need help. We are a congregation full of folks willing to help others but when was the last time you asked for help. Help in your marriage. Help in job decisions or about your kids or about your own mental and spiritual health. The paralyzed man on the mat, sooner or later had to say to his friends, “I need help.”
- (3) I'm sorry. When's the last time you said, “I'm sorry,”? Too many of us grew up with the mentality of John Wayne in the movie *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, when he tells a young cavalry officer, “Never apologize. It's a sign of weakness.” Well, John Wayne was wrong. If we're following Jesus instead of John Wayne, we learn to say, “I'm sorry.”
- (4) I was wrong. This goes hand in glove with saying “I'm sorry,” but let me ask you directly, when was the last time you said, “I was wrong,”? Have you said “I was wrong” to your spouse? To fellow church members?

Learning to say and practice these four simple sentences can help save us from our sin that shows up in isolation, estrangement, disconnection, and aloneness. Instead of sitting at home on our mat, when we confess with trusted friends, using these four sentences, we can be carried to Jesus, and we can help carry others. We learn to be church with one another in Christ.

Furthermore, it takes all of us as a community to make a difference for good. And that is especially true in this town, where are there forces and money and

people at work to disintegrate any sense we have as a community. They want an aggregation of individuals, not a community.

Rebecca Solnit says, “Our largest problems won’t be solved by heroes. They’ll be solved, if they are, by movements, coalitions, civil society.” She says it takes countless hours of organizing, committee meetings, conversations, and mundane work to make a difference for good. Climate activist, Bill McKibben says, “The most effective thing you can do about climate as an individual is stop being an individual.”

Poet Laureate of the United States Ada Limon, accepting the National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry a couple of years ago, said “We write with all the good ghosts in our corners. I, for one, have never made anything alone, never written a single poem alone” and then listed a lot of people who helped or who mattered or who didn’t get to write poetry, so she wrote for them.

I never write sermons alone, much less any articles I’ve published. As you know, everything I write is in conversation with Jane, but also a result of conversations and activities with you and with others, including authors I’m reading. Every sermon has your faces in my mind and your words echoing in my ears. Pastoral work is communal work, constantly in dialogue with you about who to visit, what to do, who is in need, and so on, all the time, every day.

So, I’m here to tell you, with this cancer, I don’t know what I’m facing and what I’m going to do. I don’t know. And I’m also here to tell you that I need help. Indeed, the church needs help. For me personally, I don’t know what this help will look like, but I know it’s coming. For many of you who are accustomed to being lone rangers, you’re going to have to learn or relearn how to trust one another and



help one another. How to say, “I don’t know, I need help, I’m sorry, and I was wrong.”

For me, I envision something like Steve Chism, Stan Bobo, Bob Choate, Jim Lemon, Joe Bartnik, Chris McDonald, and maybe Nick McCown and Sean Dugan grabbing my prayer quilt, loading me onto it, and carrying me to Jesus. Joe Bartnik grunts and says, “Damn Kyle, you need to lose some weight.” Susan Rushing says, “Alright everyone, let’s get organized. I’ve put a plan together on how to help.” Denise says, “I’ve made a Sign-Up Genius.” Bob Choate says, “Let’s trade sides, Nick, I need to use my left arm. My right arm is not helpful right now. Are you listening? Nick, what are you doing?”

“I’m making calculations on reducing drag to make it more efficient to carry him.” Joe interrupts, “Dropping about 100 pounds would make it more efficient.”

And Gina Small and Dixie Thompson say, “We’ll make a food plan for when we get there.”

There’s a big crowd outside the building and Judy McDonald knows everyone, and Matt Perry is talking with a bunch. With a lot of work and sweat, you all carry, drag, lug me up onto the roof. “Watch his head, watch it! ... Sorry, Pastor Kyle, that’ll raise a welt,” Jaime Bouldin says. “Damn, Kyle, you need to lose some weight,” Joe keeps saying. Peggy Greer keeps walking alongside everyone, “Kyle, don’t you give up! Don’t do it. Keep going. And the rest of you, don’t give up or give in.”

Steve Chism says, “Okay, we’re going to cut a hole through the roof. Justin, do you have the chainsaws? ... Hold it! Look at the grain of this wood.” Jim Lemon says, “Kyle, what are you learning from being carried like this?” Jenny

Henson is standing nearby with a big notebook, “Do we have a policy for this? And I don’t think this meets the criteria of the Building Code.”

Barbara Cordell says, “As you get ready to lower him through the hole, I’ve a technique I’ve learned through aerial yoga.” Pauline shouts, “Remember, right over left and left over right.” And Bob Szafran adds, “Statistically, there is a 67% chance that we’ll drop the pastor the last three feet. ... Oh! I guess that’s a 100% chance.” Stan shouts down, “Sorry, Pastor!” Joe Bartnik hollers, “I told you, you needed to lose some weight!” And Cindy Bertin says, “Let me get the vacuum for the dirt that fell down onto the floor.”

In the end, as I stand up, take my prayer quilt, and walk through the crowd, Sage and Rosemary run up and tickle me. Eric Cline shouts, “Kyle, I want you to walk five times around the house every day!”

And Jesus says, “Austin Heights, you are forgiven and restored to wholeness because of all of your faith.”

And we all shout, “Amen!”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.