

Oh, I Need Thee

Mark 2:1-12

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 25) 2021

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The Air Conditioner in my car is on the blink so I called the dealer to make an appointment to have it serviced and to get the car ready for a road trip. Usually, I take the car in the next morning, but the receptionist told me that it would be more than a month before they could schedule me. Ray Mitchum says its due to a labor shortage. Seems I'll have to get in line.

More and more getting in line is part of the world we're in. We show up and take a number. We hope to see a doctor and they tell us it will be a month or more. We call the plumber and they say they can come in two weeks. A handyman says it will be a month. You go to vote and discover a line down the block. In the old days, if you were a person of color maybe you could vote but you had to pay a poll tax, pass a test, could vote only during strict and narrow times, and only at the courthouse, and show proof of identity... Wait, that's today...

All this makes me wonder about this story we read this morning from Mark. It's a great story, one of my favorite stories in the entire Bible. Mark tells us that Jesus was in Capernaum teaching and so many people crowded in to hear him, that they were out the front door. It was packed inside with a line outside and more people crowding around the windows trying to hear what he was saying. Someone would hear part of Jesus' teaching but miss other parts, "What did he say?" and someone else would say, "Shh. I can't hear." Perhaps there was a gasp or perhaps

laughter inside and everyone outside looked at one another, “What did he say?” It was frustrating.

People just kept coming, crowding around the house. It’s interesting to me – I’m just wondering – that the next story in Mark, beginning at verse 13, says that Jesus went out, and again, a big crowd gathered around him as he taught them. Jesus saw nearby Levi (aka Matthew), a tax collector, and called him to follow him. Which Levi did. Now, I’m just wondering ... Levi collected taxes, probably had some accounting skills, and perhaps knew how to get things organized. Maybe Jesus and the other disciples said, “We need some help bringing order to these crowds of people.” I don’t know. I’m just wondering out loud.

Mark says that four friends came to this crowded house carrying another man on a pallet or a kind of stretcher, and they couldn’t get in the door. My imagination says perhaps Levi was sitting outside the door, “I’m sorry, you need to take a number. Here, you are number 126. Next.” Maybe one of the friends says, “What number is Jesus working on, now.” “Oh, he’s about number 17.” The friends all looked at one another and looked at their companion on the stretcher. “He needs Jesus now. We can’t wait.”

They try to work their way through the crowd but can’t. They try shouting but everyone shushes them. A fellow who looks like a leader, Simon Peter, comes over, “Sirs, you must keep your voices down. Others are trying to hear.” Exasperated, they say, “But we need Jesus now.” Peter says, “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave if you can’t keep it down. I’ll have to ask James and John to escort you out. They’re known as the ‘sons of thunder’ and you don’t want to get on their bad side.”

Now I'm just wondering. Just putting myself inside this story and walking around, listening to what people are saying, meeting a few people. Much more likely the four friends get to the line outside of the house, and there is some question among people whether they should even be there. According to the Religious Authorities, called Scribes by Mark, there were some people who were outside the community. Because of disease and sin, which were connected in their worldview, who was "in" and who was "out" was determined by the Bible and therefore by God. Of course, the catch was that these religious authorities were the ones who interpreted the Bible and made the determination of who was in and who was out. If a person had a disease, or paralysis, as in our story today, then it was because of sin, and therefore, that person was ostracized. If he or she were in poverty, as most of these common people were in this story, it was attributed to their sin or the sins of their family or ancestors, therefore, they were ostracized.

The upshot is that ostracized people were diminished as full human beings. They were dehumanized, not considered a full human being created in God's image.

And here are four men carrying their friend on a stretcher. All five were common people, doubly ostracized, for their sin embodied in sickness and poverty, all very aware of their sub-human status, their shame and guilt. And all five would have felt unwelcome in the eyes of the Scribes. I'm sure, the Scribes were asking, "Have they been properly vetted in order to be here?" At the same time, the Scribes made sure they had front row seats to check this young upstart rabbi out. They didn't like what they were hearing about him and they didn't like what they were seeing – crowds of people flocking to hear him. They could not control who

was inside this home but they could make it clear that God did not approve and of course, they didn't approve.

As I learned a couple of years ago at a conference on church security, armed church security guards are trained to be on the lookout for suspicious people coming to church. At the conference we learned that the guards would speak to each other through their lapel mic walkie-talkie when a visitor came to church, something like, "Sam, we have a DLR approaching the north door (I quickly learned that DLR mean's "Don't look right"). Do you have surveillance on the DLR?" Sam would reply, "Roger, I have eyes on target. I am engaging the target now," at which time he would go shake hands with the DLR, while other security guards kept their eyes on target.

Well, these four friends carrying another on a stretcher were DLR's, they did not look right.

None of this deterred these four friends. They were determined, desperate to get to Jesus and no crowd, no long line, no ostracism, and no Scribe was going to stop them. Using their creativity and out-thinking everyone around them, they carefully took their friend and climbed up the back way up onto the roof and began to dig through the thatching and mud until they made a hole and then they lowered their friend through the hole until he was lying there on the floor right smack in front of Jesus.

Here's my question: Have you ever been so desperate to get to Jesus that you would do something like that? Would you dig a hole in the roof to get to Jesus? Would you haul a friend all day, even up to the roof, to get to Jesus?

James Forbes is one of the greatest preachers in the country and I heard him talk about this a few months ago during a Zoom conference. He said, “There is a long history in the Black church in this country of being desperate for God. When we sing, ‘Oh, I Need Thee’ we mean it.” He went on to explain, that this sense of need and desperation goes back generations. It is hard-wired into the DNA of the Black church. Forbes said, “Even when things are bad, our history, our tradition, deep down in our bones and in our souls, we cry out, ‘God, why are you treating us this way?’ Even in anger or lament, we still cry out to God, and we expect God to explain. We expect to hear from God.” And then Dr. Forbes asked this, “Sometimes I wonder if White folks are not so sure if they need God like that? How much do you really need the Lord?”

Nancy Sehested, another of the great preachers in this country, and who has preached here, was also on the Zoom conference, asked, “We White folks look at the mess of this old world and our part in making it a mess, and we cry out to God, ‘Lord, have mercy!’ We are learning how to be desperate in our cries for mercy.”

Forbes said, “Crying for God’s mercy is a cry for God, a cry for relationship with God.”

I’ve been told by more than one Ob/Gyn doctor that in their experience, most women – believers, non-believers, different ethnicities, rich or poor – sooner or later cry out “Lord, have mercy!” in the delivery room.

When we’re desperate and we know we need God’s help, we cry out to God, “Lord, have mercy!”

In our Mark story, these four friends are desperate for God's mercy, for God, and they know their friend is desperate, so they dig a hole through the roof to lower him to Jesus below.

My imagination makes me wonder what the people sitting inside were thinking as the dirt and thatching began to fall on them, as the roof was beginning to cave in upon them? Last year, at this time, our church roof was removed and rebuilt. If we had not rebuilt it, one Sunday the roof would have started crumbling on us, too, but for a different reason.

It also makes me wonder about what we expect when we come to church. Studies say that most people come to church expecting order and safety. The world out there during the week is chaotic enough. We come to church wanting stability. Safety.

This scene in Mark is certainly a picture of the second century church who were reading and hearing this story – a crowded house church full of people trying to hear the Word of God taught. If they were expecting safety and order, they didn't get it on this day. This church in Mark is not a place of safety – safety if you mean, where everything is tranquil and stable. No, here is a church where people are tearing the roof apart to get to Jesus. You're sitting there calmly singing an old hymn and suddenly, the roof begins to crumble and soon a man is lowered down. Wow! Not dull, and certainly not safe.

At the same time, this church is a safe place for these people who have been ostracized and kept outside. Whether they looked right or not, they found

themselves in the presence of Jesus, and they knew they were in the right place, the best place, the safest place in the world. They were in the very presence of the mercy of God.

When the man is lowered down before Jesus, verse 5 says that when Jesus looked up and saw the four friends and their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven.” Our modern ears do not hear the full impact of what Jesus is saying. When he pronounces forgiveness – God’s mercy – he is restoring the man to community and relationships. No longer ostracized or left outside, now he is included. He is restored and reconciled to God and restored and reconciled with human community. And at the same time, the man is restored as a full human being.

But there is even more going on when Jesus forgives the man’s sins. He is using the language of Leviticus and the debt code. It’s not simply about the man’s sins as we would normally define them, it has to do with his poverty and indebtedness – economics. For example, when we say the Lord’s Prayer, we traditionally say, “Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.” Older translations say, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” which includes economic forgiveness of debt. This harkens back to the debt code in Lev. 25 when during the Jubilee Year, people’s debts were forgiven, wiped off the books, their lands were restored to them, and they were given the chance to start over again. Jesus is using Jubilee language in pronouncing forgiveness. He is upsetting the debt system, pronouncing this man debt-free, so the man is free to start fresh.

No wonder the Authorities are upset and call Jesus a blasphemer. And no wonder they try to get him in the end by using the same charge over in chapter 13 when he is crucified.

Jesus says, “Ok, if you think you know so much how about this? Just to let you know that I have the authority on earth to forgive sins and debts,” and he turns to the paralyzed man, “Stand up, take your mat, and go home.” And the man did exactly that. Mark concludes, “The crowd was amazed and glorified God saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this!”

I can’t hear this story without remembering Children’s Sabbath here about seven or eight years ago, when Drew Watson and a bunch younger boys did a skit on this very story. At the end when Jesus says, “Stand up, take your mat, and go home,” Drew stood up from her mat, and did full body flips up the aisle. The younger boys shouted, and we all joined in saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this!”

Where are you in this story? I invite you to take some time, read it over and over a few times, and use your imagination. Who was there? What was it like? What did you see? Hear? Smell? Feel? Who is there vetting people and suspicious of any DLR’s present? And who is there because they’re desperate for God? Where are you?

Years ago, when I was working for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America in Atlanta, GA, I was with a church van load of people from Oakhurst Baptist Church as we had traveled, once again, to the state prison outside of Jackson, GA, where another man was being executed by electric chair. We joined

several Catholic nuns, a handful of Quakers, some Mennonites, and a bunch of Black Baptists for a prayer vigil outside the gates of the prison. We prayed and read Scripture, lit candles, and prayed some more for God to have mercy on us all. “Please God, have mercy” – and we would name the man about to be killed – and then we would pray “please God, have mercy on us for being the kind of people who kill each other in order to teach people not to kill each other.”

There was an air of desperation that night. We knew our efforts were mostly futile, but we prayed and cried to God for mercy all the more. Across the way, not more than from one end of our building to the other, separated only by a rope stretched between pylons, was a gathering of the Klan. Some were wearing their robes while others wore camo and they were there to party. Cheering for the death of this convicted man, of course, a Black man, the Klan was eager for more killing to happen so there might be proper return of “order” in society. Soon they began to chant, “Kill him again. Kill him again. Harder. Harder. Burn him again. Burn him again, longer, longer.”

What do you do in such a situation? We were standing there with our little candles of light feeling overwhelmed by the darkness of hatred and death. Suddenly, one of the Black Baptist women started singing in the darkness, *“I need Thee every hour, Most gracious Lord. No tender voice like Thine, Can peace afford/ I need Thee, O I need Thee. Every hour I need Thee. O bless me now, my Savior. I come to Thee.”*

Over there chanting “Kill him. Kill him, harder, harder.” Over here singing, “I need thee, Oh, I need thee.” ... Where are you?

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