

Four friends, Faith that is Seen, and a Contested Miracle

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I love this story. Jesus is at Peter's house in Capernaum "preaching the word", and the crowd gathered around him so filled the house you couldn't get in the door.

Mark's first chapter says why. Jesus came preaching. His theme? "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent (turn) and believe the good news." Then a whirl of activity which enacted the sermon: Jesus healing and exorcizing demons, so many that his fame spread and people began to flock around him to hear his words, to be healed and to be set free from evil spirits.

Now he is at Peter's house and the house is packed.

I

Here come four friends hauling their paralyzed friend on a pallet to Jesus so he could be healed. The man could not get there on his own, so his friends took him. Did he ask them to, or did his friends take the initiative? "Let's go, Joe, and see the healer." He may not have had faith enough, hope enough even to ask.

Are you one of the four friends in the story? Or, are you the one on the makeshift gurney? Can you feel the sides of the pallet, holding onto them as they jostle you along?

There are many ways to be paralyzed. And there are times we cannot get to a place of healing on our own.

But here is the gospel at work, the *gospel as friendship*. The four friends have heard about Jesus the healer, so they pack their friend up and carry him to Jesus.

When they arrive they discover the house is so jammed with people they can't even get through the door, much less to Jesus. So up they go, climbing the outside staircase to the flat roof of the house. I remember as a boy making models of the house in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School.

I wonder who the ringleader was in the group, the take charge guy who always said, "There's gotta be a way." The one who organized the trip and who now said, "Let's go to the roof. I have a plan."

The plan was to tear a hole in the roof and let the man down through the hole into the presence of Jesus. So here comes a section of the roof: clay, sticks, mud, straw. A holy "breaking and entering".

Imagine Jesus trying to preach. He hears the scurrying noises on the roof. And now here come the clay, sticks, mud and straw raining down on them. Peter was going over the fine print in his homeowner's insurance policy. Could this go under "act of God"?

Imagine the commotion, the crowd trying to escape the falling debris, clearing a spot for the man in front of Jesus.

The text then says Jesus "*saw their faith*". Not the faith of the paralyzed man but the faith of the four friends. *Their faith*. What about the faith of the paralyzed man? Had he *borrowed* the faith of his friends? We do that in church, you know. I come to church not having much faith that day, but I see the faith of my friends and borrow theirs. Faith can be *caught*; faith is contagious. Paul speaks of us gathering as a church "so we might be mutually encouraged by each other's faith". (Romans 1:12)

And note: he *saw* their faith, he didn't hear it but saw it. Here is faith as something you see. Here is faith as faithful action, faith with legs. Faith that hopes so much that Jesus can help that we'll do almost anything to get our friend to him.

Later on in the New Testament James the brother of Jesus would champion this kind of faith. "Faith without works is dead", he said, (James 2:17). And this:

“Some may say, ‘You have the faith part and I’ll take the works part’. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith”. (James 2:18). Faith is more than a set of beliefs, more than the recitation of a creed: “I believe in God almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” It is carrying a friend for help. It is more than a feeling. Feelings come and go. It is tearing up somebody’s roof (hopefully not mine) in order to get a friend to Jesus.

We need a faith that can be seen. When you come to church it is faith that can be seen. When you help someone in need it is faith that can be seen. Some days, when you just get up, get dressed and go to work it is faith that can be seen.

II

What we see here is *friendship as a form of the gospel*. Friendship as an embodiment of the goodness and steadfast love of God. Judith Viorst describes friendship as “comforting and exuberant, sacred and miraculous connection.” It is so. So here are some thoughts about friendship

~Friends rejoice in one another—in their very *being-ness*

~Friends work for the good of their friend.

~Friends are “celebrants, advocates, defenders” of their friends.

~Friends become encouragers. We all need such friends. Can you remember times when someone has been your encourager, and it made all the difference in the world?

~Friendship can be thicker than blood, for friends are the family we choose, or who choose us, who take us in when we had nowhere else to go.

~Friends sorrow with our sorrows and kick up their heels with our joy. Life is certainly both, and friends are around for both.

~When we stumble and “out” ourselves as a member of the fallible human race, friends stick with us and help us to our feet.

~Friends call us to our best; they remind us that we are the Beloved of God, made in the divine image. Early theologian Irenaeus said: “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” Friends help us toward that aliveness.

~Friendship has a self-forgetful, self sacrificing quality. Friends are the ones you call in the middle of the night, or on those days when you really need help.

If friendship is a form of the gospel, the church should be, as the Quakers called themselves, a “Society of Friends”.

Frederick Buechner's writings have been an inspiration to thousands, including me, but the most "church" he has found has been in the basement of churches, where 12-step groups meet. In an interview in 2002 he was asked what he said to church groups when invited to speak. He responded:

I say that the best thing that could happen to your church is for it to burn down and for all your fax machines and email machines to be burned up and for the minister to be run over by a truck, so that you have nothing left except each other and God. And then I say if you want to know what the original church was like, go to an AA meeting where all they have is each other and God, and they say to each other: "We cannot live whole lives without each other and a "Higher power".

The interviewer then asked, "How do ministers respond to that?" Buechner said,

I think they all damn well know what I'm talking about.

I, Steve, am not advocating a fire, or that I be hit by a truck, but I think I know what he's talking about. What we need most is God and each other. Friendship as a form of the gospel. I see it richly in this church. Sometimes we are one of the four friends. Sometimes we are the one on the cot.

III

But let's not forget about the paralyzed man. He's there on the pallet and Jesus says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." The man might have thought: "That's great, but that's not why I'm here. My legs, Lord, my legs."

It may seem curious that Jesus would begin his healing by forgiving the man's sins. But at that time illness was seen as a punishment of sins. Terrible theology. But I've seen people in hospitals who felt they were being punished by God. And the first step to healing was my offering the grace of God to them and the assurance that God was not judging them but only wanting their healing. They needed to move from a House of Judgment to a House of Love.

Now we have the theological skirmish between Jesus and the religious critics in the room. They call Jesus a blasphemer: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" They care more about their theology than about the man lying on a cot.

They want to control the flow of forgiveness. They think they own the franchise on forgiveness: This is how it's done, at the temple, bring a sacrifice, etc. But here comes Jesus bringing forgiveness as free as the sun that shines and the rains that fall. Dangerous man!

Jesus read their minds, "Why do you raise such questions in your heart? Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven', or 'Stand, take your pallet and

walk'? But so you may know the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins, look at this".

He turned to the paralytic and said "Rise, take up your pallet and go home." And the man stood up, took his mat and went home

Who knows what the critics felt; my guess is that they were not pleased. But the crowd, the crowd, they were all amazed and glorified God saying, "We've never seen the like!"

In life we choose to be among the critics or among the praisers. You cannot be both at the same time. I think I know which group I want to be in! Critics stand on the sidelines. Praisers are in the thick of life.

IV

This Lent I will be preaching on the commands of Christ. We often think of commands as negative: "Don't do this!" Or, "You must do this, or else!" But many of Jesus' commands were liberating and healing. Like his words to the paralyzed man: "Rise, take up you pallet and walk".

Do we need that word today? We all find ourselves on a pallet some days, and we need Jesus' liberating command, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk".

Or, perhaps we need Jesus' first words to the man: "Son, your sins are forgiven." Forgiveness is what we all down deep need. For "long ago" sins or last week's mess ups. Guilt or shame can paralyze our spirits as surely as polio can put us on a cot. But God wants us "fully alive", to be able to *live* with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. And it may begin with forgiveness.

There is so much good news in this story. How about for you?