

“The Busyness of Love”
Sermon from Mark 2:1-12a
Given Sunday, July 19, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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Jesus came back to Capernaum after several days, and word spread that he was home. People began to gather in such great numbers that there was no longer any room for them, even around the door.

While Jesus was delivering God’s word to them, some people arrived, bringing a paralyzed person. The four who carried the invalid were unable to reach Jesus because of the crowd, so they began to open up the roof directly above Jesus. When they had made a hole, they lowered the mat on which the paralyzed one was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the sufferer, “My child, your sins are forgiven.”

Now some of the religious scholars were sitting there asking themselves, “Why does Jesus talk in that way? He commits blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Jesus immediately perceived in his spirit that they reasoned this way among themselves, and said to them, “Why do you harbor such thoughts? Which is easier, to say to the paralyzed person, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk’? But so you all may know that the Promised One has authority on earth to forgive sins” - Jesus then turned to the paralyzed person - “I tell you, stand up! Pick up your mat and go home.” The paralyzed person stood up, picked up the mat, and walked outside in the sight of everyone.

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Sometimes it’s fun just to wonder about the Bible. Even the most familiar stories have some details that could raise eyebrows.

Like, I wonder how involved this person who was healed was in the planning of the event – was it spontaneous, or was it orchestrated? Were his friends all gathered around? Did they say to him, “ok, this is it, we’re going in tomorrow morning; we know we’ll never get

near him on the street but we've heard he's gonna be at Jacob's house so we'll go in through the roof..." Did the paralyzed person know about the plan ahead of time? Was he part of the scheming? Or did they come and take him, unsuspecting? Did he try to put up a fight – could he have? Did the friends – seeing the panic in his eyes – just keep reassuring him on the way there, "Trust me, this is going to end well"?

Someone at Bible Study on Friday wondered about the relationship between the friends – like maybe they were all carpenters together, and a beam fell on the one, paralyzing him, and his family had suffered since he'd been unable to work, and his friends had pitched in all they could but it was starting to be a real strain on them, too... so they hatched this plan?

What do you wonder about? Do you wonder if Jesus felt caught – like, the guy was lowered in front of him into a crowded house; what were his options in that moment? Do you wonder if you'd be bold enough to do something like that for a friend? Do you wonder which of your friends might do it for you?

Someone else at Bible Study said, "I wonder about the person whose house it was – I wonder what they thought when the friends started taking apart their roof!"

And someone else wondered which felt more liberating – when the man heard the invitation to get up and walk, and found that he could; or when he heard that his sins were forgiven.

The theologian Paul Tillich said this moment in the story – where Jesus tells the paralyzed one his sins are forgiven – that’s not just for that guy. They’re in a really crowded space. This is early in the story of Jesus, people might not be sure yet what they think of him, but they’ve probably got their minds made up about this guy who’s come through the roof. He’s got these friends who are loyal to him, but, you know, people talk.

And at the time of our story, the idea that people suffer misfortune because they’ve offended God somehow was prevalent. In that worldview, there are no accidents. There are only consequences. Everything – good or bad – is earned, deserved. In that context, to be paralyzed means not only that you can’t physically move, it means you are immobilized by the weight of other people’s assumptions and judgments about you.

So for Jesus to say in front of everyone that this person was forgiven – that’s really significant. That does two-fold work. If the people in the crowd believe Jesus – which they probably do once the guy gets up and walks – that forgiveness frees them from their assumptions about the one who’d been suffering. And it frees the paralyzed one, too, from those same debilitating judgments, and from the shame he carried in response to them.

Tillich says that *forgiveness is the way that God says to us: “Life accepts you; life loves you as a separated part of itself; life wants to reunite you with itself, even when it seems to destroy you.”* This is the invitation being offered to the paralyzed one, not in the walking again but in the shedding of all else that kept him bound.

And his friends made that possible. His friends brought him to a place where he could hear and receive that. I think about the words in First Corinthians that tell us about love – love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres – and I wonder what else we learn above love from this story – *Love is generous. Love is bold. Love takes risks. Like forgiveness, love wants to bring us to fullest life.*

Love never fails.

And Teresa of Avila, our guide through this summer – if she were to wonder about this story, I think she would wonder about the union of wills that's on display in this story. I think she would wonder what this love cost the friends – she tells us that love is costly. And I think she would wonder about the everyday, ordinary ways these friends continued to care for one another once the one in such need was healed.

Teresa's written a record of her visions of the soul – it's called *The Interior Castle* and it's really meant for her sisters in the Carmelite convent in Spain where she lived 500 years ago. But her central metaphor for the soul is that it's like a home – it's like a home with many different rooms to explore; it's like a home where sometimes dangers sneak in but where we're meant to be safe and to grow; it's like a home and God dwells in the very center of it, and we're moving always closer to that center, towards union with God. But each room – each “dwelling place” in the home, along the way to the

center, each one teaches us something new, and we stay in that room until we learn it, until we get it.

And here in the fifth dwelling place, we learn about love. Here, what moves us closer to God, closer to the center of our truest selves, is the ordinary love we practice, day after day, for one another. “Love is never idle,” Teresa tells us, and so for her, that means she’s always trying to unite her will with that of her sisters. It means if they feel pain, she moves in closer to feel it, too. It means if they need to eat, she might need to fast. It means if they’re praised, she rejoices with them.

Here in the fifth dwelling place, she tells us: “We cannot know whether we love God. But we can know whether we love our neighbor.” She tells her sisters, “Since this love for neighbor is so important, let’s try to understand ourselves even in little things, and pay no attention to any big plans that sometimes suddenly come to us during prayer in which it seems we will do wonders for our neighbor...” She dismisses those big plans outright.

Which, I think, is not to condemn these friends from our scripture who lowered the one they loved through the roof, or anyone who might commit an act of outrageous generosity and risk on behalf of their neighbor. *It is just to say there are a million other ways to love, a million ordinary ways.* Like, you could name some, right? Ordinary ways you’ve been loved by your friends, or neighbors, or even strangers?

A neighbor of mine knocked on our door recently to let us know we’d left the hose on... Another came to gift us a sackful of a variety

of zucchini I hadn't ever tasted before... Another let us borrow a ladder. No big deal.

That's the kind of love we can give and receive day in and day out, the kind that cultivates in us a habit of love, a practice of graciousness, a way of saying something, like we heard in the Children's Story, that shapes our hearts toward one another, and so toward the God that is in every one. Teresa of Avila's namesake, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, famously said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." A lowering through a roof is a great thing, a new lease on life – so maybe we can do some of that. But small things, too, are life-giving – a warning about a hose is a way my neighbor kept me safe. A sackful of zucchini is nourishment and care. An offering of a ladder for a few hours is a gift that makes necessary work possible.

Near the end of her description of the fifth dwelling place, Teresa issues this warning: "If we fail in love of neighbor, we are lost." Lost within our home, our soul – we are oriented and grounded by our love for one another, and without it we do not know where we are or how to be. And lost – like, if we fail at love of neighbor we have lost at this life we've been entrusted with. We've lost this gift from God, this chance to explore and be at home in the world, to meet a new face of God in every new encounter – if we fail in love of neighbor, we have lost all that.

I can't imagine a warning more important for these days we're in now. I can't imagine a call more true than this one that tells us that the everyday ways we notice, and care for one another, the efforts we make to feel each other's joys and pains, and the occasional

grand gesture that we hope will bring more freedom, more justice, for our neighbor – those are all what save us. That’s the love that saves each of us, and the world we have been given to care for and to share.

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Journal Prompt: Describe a time when you have shown love, or when you have been shown love by another, through what Teresa calls “the performance of ordinary tasks.” What did this do for your soul?