

TAKING CHARGE OF OUR BED

Sermon, August 8, 2021

Text: Mark 2:1-14, Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

As we just read from Ephesians, the apostle Paul gives the following marching orders to the Christians there, and by inference, to all Christians through the ages: In short, "*Put off falsehood. Speak truthfully. In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. If you're stealing, stop it. Do honest work so you may have something worthwhile to share. Stop the corrupting and destructive talk, just stop it. Rather, say GOOD things, encouraging things, things that build people up rather than tearing them down or apart. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, slander, malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other. And make every effort to be imitators of God ... WALK in love, just as Jesus loved us.*

That's pretty straightforward; I could probably just end the sermon now ... but I won't.

What often makes it difficult to "walk in love," what cripples us in our walk with God, in being imitators of God, are largely these things Paul mentions: our falsehoods, including our bald-faced lies AND our little deceptions; the unwholesome and nasty and unhelpful talk and outright slander that comes out of our mouths; the bitterness and rage and anger and malice we nurture and allow to fester in our hearts; our dishonest blatant OR secretive stealing and cheating and so on and on. Yes, sometimes the greatest hurts in life are the ones we cause ourselves by such actions, making it difficult, if not impossible, to keep walking with God. The resulting guilt and anxiety at times immobilizes us, paralyzes us, making it difficult, if not impossible, for us to keep walking with God.

The late theologian R.C. Sproul used to tell the story when teaching on this passage from Mark 2 of being asked (*thirty or so years ago*) by a prominent psychiatrist in southern Florida if he would consider coming on his staff. He was offering R.C. a salary retainer of \$100,000 per year if he would join his team. Sproul politely declined, mostly because he had another calling, but also adding, "*I don't even have a psychiatry degree.*" The psychiatrist replied, "*RC, 95% of my clients don't need a psychiatrist, they need a priest, because their lives are just destroyed by unresolved guilt.*"

The cure, the only way to get moving forward again, is to hear from God, really hear, that our sins are forgiven. And after hearing you are forgiven, take it to heart. Believe it. Turn away from falsehood, from deception, from stealing, from dishonesty, from bitterness and so on and do what you should do and go where you should go. Be an imitator of God, and go to where you belong, to where you are created to be ... which is at the side of God, walking in step with Him. In his commentary on this passage from Mark's gospel, St. Augustine wrote, "*Turn from the bed that had taken charge of you, for now is the time to take charge of your bed.*" Turn from whatever it is that is immobilizing you, paralyzing you, crippling you; turn from whatever it is that has just grasped hold of you, and heed the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, "*Rise, pick up your mat and go home.*" Go home. Go home, come home, to where you belong.

Our Gospel reading begins by telling us that Jesus was at home in Capernaum. We don't usually think about Jesus even having a home; we just assume He was out and about all the time. But it seems from Mark Jesus did have a home, a home He would go to find rest. In Jesus' home, the door was apparently open. People crowded into this home to hear Him and to see Him. This is early on in his public ministry, and people are crowding in from everywhere to see Him; you might say His ministry is about to go through the roof. Well, today it literally is about to go through the roof! (*Some authorities believe this may have actually been Peter's home; archeologists have unearthed what they believe to have been Peter's home in Capernaum, several of us saw it on our 2018 trip to the Holy Land ... a church with a clear plexiglass floor is built over that site so one can peer down inside; if indeed this was the home Mark refers to, that church is built where this house's roof had been.*)

Four people at the back of that crowd in Jesus' home were carrying with them on a mat a friend who was paralyzed. When they realized there was no way they were going to get through this crowd to get their friend in front of Jesus, they came up with a plan. With commitment, ingenuity and a touch of desperation, they devised a plan to climb up on the roof of Jesus' home, cut and dig a large hole in that roof, and lower their friend down through that hole and place him at the feet of Jesus right in the middle of His sermon. Talk about noise distracting others from the sermon! This is more than candy wrappers rattling or babies crying; but Jesus did not seem to mind the distraction (*He didn't say, "Get them off the roof and send them down to Children's Church; can't you see I'm busy!"*); in fact, He seemed to delight in it! It's a good thing Jesus was raised as a carpenter, because He was going to have to deal with that hole in His roof later on. But again, He didn't seem bothered as He looked up through the hole. As Jesus saw these four men holding ropes laying their friend in front of him, Jesus was impressed and delighted to have them there! He welcomed the interruption and the distraction of people who just wanted to be closer to Him.

We are told that He was so impressed by the faithfulness of these four men that He said to the paralytic, "*Son, your sins are forgiven!*"

Let me stop there for a moment to make an observation. We all need friends like these four friends. On this at-times difficult journey through life we need friends for companionship, for encouragement, we need friends for support. We need them for help when we are overwhelmed, we need them for comfort when we are in grief, we need friends for celebration when our hearts are full of joy. Most of all, though, we need friends when we are figuratively or literally paralyzed ... immobilized by our grief, or by our guilt, by our hurts, by our anxieties, by our afflictions ... some of which we have often caused ourselves, but not all. A real friend is someone to whom you can confess when you are stuck in a mess, and a real friend will want to do whatever it takes to get you walking again.

You may know someone stuck in a mess of their own making. Someone who made some bad financial decisions, and is now is in big trouble, or perhaps someone's whose drinking has gone from social to secretive to addictive, or perhaps someone whose family seems to be coming apart at the seams ... whatever it may be. When these things happen to you, you feel stuck, immobilized. You are, in effect, paralyzed. You don't know what you are going to do. You don't know how you're going to get out of this. Acquaintances can tell something is wrong, so they may say, "How are you?" But since they're acquaintances, you may smile and put on a good face, but inwardly in your soul you long for a friend. A genuine friend who wants to know, not because he wants to the gossip about you later, or because he wants to feel smugly superior because your "mess" is so much worse than his mess, but a friend who wants to do whatever it takes to help get you up and walking again.

What is it that these friends do for their paralyzed friend? Do they offer advice, trying to fix him? "*Well, what you need to do is ... Well, have you thought of trying ...*" Such friends might mean well, but often such advice is like giving tips on walking to the paralyzed. They can't move! They are in over their heads, and they are often in over *your* head. When someone in crisis comes to you, be a friend. Do something that will really help them. Carry them to Jesus. We call that prayer: lifting (*or, in this case, lowering!*) our friends before the presence of Jesus. Prayer is the primary way we carry our loved ones to Jesus, which is really the most powerful thing we can do.

We don't know what was going on in the mind of the paralyzed man as his friends lowered him down from the roof, but I imagine he might have been embarrassed. It was so undignified. It's not the way any of us want to come to Jesus. We prefer to approach Jesus standing on our own two feet, coming to Jesus on our own initiative. We prefer our "personal" faith, which, by the way, is a term the Bible never uses. Faith is never just "my" faith. There's a sermon in itself in all this, but for now I'll simply say that before the faith is your faith, it is first *our* faith ... and some times the faith is just *their* faith. That time will come for all of us, if it hasn't come for you already. A time when you realize you do not have the faith, or the hope, or the strength to get to Jesus on your own. In those times, you'll have to lean on the faith, the hope, and the strength of friends. I'd like to underscore what Mark tells us: "*When Jesus saw THEIR faith, He said to the man, your sins are forgiven.*" (*At the risk of being heretical, one might say that this man was not saved by his "personal" faith in Christ, according to Mark! But that's a whole other sermon.*)

Why would Jesus heal him by saying your sins are forgiven? We know from other places in Scripture that sin doesn't necessarily result in sickness, and that sickness isn't always the result of sin; think of Job or the blind man in John 9. Mark leaves that unanswered; suffice it to say for now, Jesus knew this man's need. Jesus also was making a divine claim which I can only touch on briefly ... in short, the Pharisees here are correct, only God can forgive sin ... and Jesus IS God in the flesh Who has come into this world to pay the huge and difficult and tremendous price to make forgiveness possible. His question, "Which is easier?" wasn't a trick question ... for He knew how tremendously difficult and arduous a task it was going to be for Him to make forgiveness possible. Back to the original question: Why did He say that? Perhaps it is because He is making the point that nothing will paralyze us quite like guilt. Guilt may be one of the most crippling diseases the human race knows. We feel this very real guilt because of what we have done and what we have left undone. We have guilt because we got worried, so we took over from God, and made a bigger mess than what we were worried about. We have guilt because we violated the laws of God, laws given to us as gracious boundaries. We don't actually break God's laws. Whether we obey them or not, they are still there. To try to break God's law would be like trying to break the law of gravity ... you'll eventually find out that the law always wins. No, we don't break God's law, but when we violate it, the law breaks us. The only cure is found in Jesus Christ, by Whose grace and word we can be forgiven.

Again, after hearing that you are forgiven, take it to heart. Believe it. And then, turn ... "*turn from the bed that had taken charge of you, for now is the time to take charge of your bed.*" Turn away from falsehood, from deception, from stealing, from dishonesty, from bitterness and so on and strive to be an imitator of God, and go to where you belong, go home to where you are created to be ... which is at the side of God, walking in step with Him.