

Kirby Lawrence Hill WMPC

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

Mark 2:1-12

April 8, 2018

ACCESS

I have always found it interesting to see who relates to a particular character in a story or movie. When it gets to be Halloween, we see which character children of various ages want to imitate. But all of us, at any age, have the capacity to take special interest in one particular character in a broader story. You just heard a story from Mark's Gospel in which there are different plot lines and multiple characters. Let me ask you: is there someone or perhaps more than one character within the story that you related to as you heard it?

Some of you may imagine yourself as part of the crowd gathered around Jesus, filling to overflowing a house in the village of Capernaum on the Galilean shore. Can you picture yourself being among them listening to Jesus teach about God, life, faith, hope, and love? I've been to the archeological site of ancient Capernaum and have walked among the stone foundation ruins of houses from the first century wondering just where it was that this story unfolded. The houses were very small, so it wouldn't take too large a crowd to fill one to overflowing. Can you see yourself in that setting?

Or does the character of the man who is paralyzed more immediately resonate with you? He wasn't able to come sit at Jesus' feet without assistance. He needed someone to open the way for such an encounter. Perhaps you didn't come to Jesus in what some would consider the normal way or even you might have been paralyzed with guilt or fear or some other force in your life and as a result of your encounter with Christ, you grew in your capacity to take new steps.

Perhaps your focus went to the four who carried the paralyzed man. These were the ones who Jesus described as having faith, a faith which got lived out through a dogged determination to find a way to assist someone who was in need. They did not push their way into the house, but they were diligent in pursuing their goal, even

if it meant using unconventional means. If they couldn't get the man into the house through the door, and there probably was only one door, then they would carry him up what were in all likelihood outside steps which led to the roof, used then like we would use a porch today. Another part of the roof probably consisted of palm branches coated with clay. Mark tells us these escorts were so convinced that Jesus could help their friend that they dug through the roof and lowered the man who was paralyzed down to Jesus.

This part of the story may lead us to think about an unmentioned figure in the story: the owner of the house. He must have been inside the house with Jesus and the crowd. Did he give permission for the improvised sun roof to be initiated? How did he feel when dirt clods from the un-roofing project fell down on his guest of honor? Did he view what some might describe as creative problem solving as troublesome and destructive? Who was going to pay for the repair work that was now needed?

There were religious leaders, scribes who were sitting there as well. They may have heard Jesus when he had taught in the synagogue. I imagine they had heard tales of his miraculous works and they were pressing to see and hear for themselves whether this was a renegade rabbi they would need to challenge. Everyone must have been surprised when the man suffering from paralysis was lowered through the roof, but the scribes were even more surprised when Jesus said to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

What was going on here? Jesus had not previously met the man. In offering forgiveness, he wasn't talking about some offense that man had carried out against him. Was Jesus speaking on behalf of God? On what basis could he do that? The scribes didn't say anything verbally, but their questions must have been written all over their faces. For Jesus then challenges them, asking whether it is easier to forgive the man or to heal him. After that Jesus tells the man to rise, take up his mat and go home. And to the amazement of all, he does just that. The story concludes with everyone saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" I can only imagine the scribes said it with a different tone of voice.

Whichever character or group you identified with, among the issues this story deals with is the relationship between sin and ailment, forgiveness and healing. Many people in Jesus' time generally thought that illness arose from people's sins. They thought this happened in a fairly immediate cause-and-effect relationship as an expression of God's judgment. Some in our time believe that as well. Jesus' ministry here and in other passages does not support such a view. Perhaps a sense of guilt or shame was an additional block to a path of restoration and wholeness for the man. So Jesus opens the way for the man to experience God's grace. He tends to the emotional and spiritual needs of the paralyzed person first, but he doesn't stop there.

Let's go back to the group of people who were crowded into the house so that they could listen to what Jesus had to say. It was good that they were there listening for what Jesus might say. And yet, were they oblivious to the needs of a paralyzed man outdoors who could not get in because of their inaction? I dare say that the way toward spiritual, mental, and physical restoration can still be blocked even by good folks who listen to Jesus' teachings. This was a rabbi who was willing to interrupt whatever lesson or sermon he was presenting in order to address the special needs of someone. It seems to me that there were a lot more people in the story who needed forgiveness than just the man on the mat. Surely, the same holds true today.

I'm hoping that those of us who are on the edge of our seats for every word of guidance and inspiration that Jesus might offer will take note of his actions and who he highlights as the faithful in this story. I'm hoping we can become more like the four individuals who made sure there was a way for someone they cared about to have access to what was needed. I imagine that in deciding what stories to include in his gospel account, that Mark didn't want only to demonstrate Jesus' power to heal and to forgive sins, but also to give warning that if the structures that define our community life are so narrow that they do not allow certain people to access the grace and healing God has to offer, then those structures must be altered.

We honor our longer-term members today. I give thanks for their decades of dedication to this congregation and its ministries. Some of our longer-term members have great difficulty moving from one part of our facilities to another.

Some can't access certain programs we have here at all because of the inaccessibility of the structure. However, if we give generously to our capital campaign, we will be able to build an elevator that will help us live into the role of the four people in this story who Jesus described as full of faith. That is a faith-filled way to reflect God's love to any of any age who have mobility challenges. Think of someone you love who faces such challenges and let that love guide how much you might give to the campaign that will build an elevator. And while we're talking about roofs, the campaign will also provide a new roof for the Christian Education building, among other things.

How did the story in Mark end? The people in glorifying God said, "We have never seen anything like this!" I think they were not only talking about what Jesus had done, but also about the dedication of the four people that opened the way for Jesus' ministry in that place. Those four would not take a blocked door for an answer. They believed in a God who offered forgiveness and healing, and they found a way to tell that story from the rooftops. This capital campaign could be our way of doing something faithfully similar. Thanks be to God who wants all people to have access to God's great blessings. Amen.