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Saved by the Faith of a Friend

Luke 5:17-26

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One of the truths we see over and over again in the Gospel of Luke is that Jesus can put people's lives back together. People who have been physically sick, mentally impaired, socially branded, enslaved by sin – all have their lives put together and made whole by Jesus. One of the reasons why Luke's Gospel is so appealing is that we see Jesus repeatedly forgiving hurting, guilt-ridden people; healing broken people; and confronting all people with the demands of living in and proclaiming God's kingdom. The Gospel passage for this morning is about how Jesus puts a man's life back together. It is also about the faith of friends who help bring a buddy from the captivity of sin to the freedom of forgiveness. We can be glad that Jesus is still putting lives back together through his ability to forgive our sins and heal us. Today friends still play an indispensable role in bringing hurting and broken people to Jesus. Listen to Luke 5:17-26:

“One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, **“Friend, your sins are forgiven.”** The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, *“Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”* Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, *“Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But I want you to know that **the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.**”* So he said to the paralyzed man, *“I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”* Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, *“We have seen remarkable things today.”* (TNIV)

Up to this point in his gospel, Luke relates some of the activities of Jesus that generate great popularity; however, as Jesus' ministry grew in popularity, inevitably there were controversies with some of the religious people at the time. This story shows

one type of disagreement concerning the forgiveness of sins. The ministry of Jesus attracted not only the sick, the demon possessed, but also the Pharisees and the teachers of the Jewish law who came from near and far to check out and scrutinize this teacher, preacher, healer, and exorcist named Jesus.

While they were present so were a whole bunch of needy people. The house is quickly packed. Jammed to the rafters. Spilling into the street. Breaking the fire code. Folks literally couldn't get in the door. Jesus is talking and healing with a standing room only crowd. Then there is an interruption. Someone yells something, probably the owner of the property; that is not included in our text. A mat is being lowered with a man on it and the faces of four concerned men can be seen as their arms flex as they lower the mat to the floor right in front of Jesus. What is going on?

If you have a friend with a toothache, what do you tell her to do? If you have a friend who falls and breaks his arm, would you call 911 or offer to drive him to the hospital? If you have a friend who is hungry, would offer to get her lunch? In any of these situations, we offer to help because we realize that our friend has a need and we know how to help take care of it. We have enough faith in a dentist, doctor, or restaurant that we feel confident about their ability to meet our friend's need. Do we have as much faith in Jesus as we do in dentists, doctors, and restaurants?

We have faith in people and places with which we are familiar. Just as we don't feel comfortable recommending a doctor who never cared for us or a restaurant at which we haven't eaten, we will not feel comfortable bringing needy friends to a Jesus with whom we are not familiar. The more we come to know Jesus, the greater our faith in his ability to put people's lives back together. If Jesus has done it for us, how much greater will be our confidence that he can do the same for someone else, for our friend.

Like the friends in the scripture, we all know people who are hurting or paralyzed with guilt, fear, worry, addictive or self-destructive behavior, impatience, anxiety, relationships that have soured, loneliness, depression, grief and all kinds of needs. Virtually everyone here has a friend who is struggling with a sin of some kind and the need for forgiveness – even if some of our friends don't use those terms themselves. Where do we bring these people? To whom do we bring these people for healing, hope, and forgiveness? The friends in this story say to us, **“Bring them in and lay them before Jesus.”**

We have friends with needs Jesus can meet but we are the connecting link. The man in the gospel story is paralyzed – perhaps because of a physical condition, perhaps

because of unresolved guilt, but whatever the reason he is paralyzed which means there is no way he can get to Jesus unless someone else brings him. His condition represents the condition of so many folks. We know people who will never get in the house where Jesus is present and God's word is shared unless we invite and bring them. Unless we do our part, Jesus' power to heal and forgive will never transform our friends. The four men in the gospel not only bring their friend in need to Jesus; they demonstrate a faith that is willing to do Whatever Is Necessary to get their friend before Jesus.

Many of us struggle with knowing when to share with or speak to a friend about Jesus or faith or when to invite someone to worship, Bible study or some other activity. We don't want to offend people or be perceived as pushy. We want to treat other people with respect. The four friends in this story are an inspiration to me because they take the initiative. They are ordinary people, we never even learn their names, but they have a winning faith. They believe so strongly that Jesus can make a difference in their friend's life that nothing will discourage, deter, or dissuade them. The crowd is blocking the path, they can't get in much less get a seat. They immediately begin to think optionally, "*How can we get around this obstacle? How can we get our friend to Jesus?*" The people are just too much for them to face, so they climb way up to the top of the stairs and go up on the roof. Once on the roof they begin some unsolicited home improvements – "this would be a great place for a big sky light." Dirt, dust, and debris fall from the ceiling. There is a commotion. People scatter. Jesus looks up. Where there was only a roof, the sky appears. A mat is being lowered by four men, when it gets down low enough a man can be seen lying on it. Are his eyes the only part of him still capable of movement? They are looking around with embarrassment at the unwanted attention, wanting to keep being lowered right through the floor out of sight of all these people. And then there are the eyes of Jesus. The gospel tells us what he is looking at.

"When Jesus saw **their faith**, he said, "***Friend, your sins are forgiven.***" When Jesus sees the friends, he sees people of faith. Jesus sees people who have confidence in God. Is it possible our reluctance to bring people to a place where they can encounter Jesus comes, at the root, from a lack of confidence that in Jesus, the Almighty can truly meet people's needs?

Jesus will fulfill his end of forgiving and healing if we do our part and do whatever is necessary to bring our friends to Jesus. Being healed does not necessarily mean we will receive the health of an Olympic athlete or even the condition we had when we were younger. Healing may not mean that one who is terminally ill, lives. Healing can take

many forms and one of them is the inner transformation that allows us to accept a chronic or even terminal condition, that otherwise would drive us to doubt, despair, or depression. That is why support groups for people dealing with a variety of challenges are so important – whether it is a cancer group, a 12 step group, a bereavement group, a Christian small group – they bear witness to the role that friends and faith play in healing.

The friends in the gospel are people of faith because they bring their friend to a place of possibility. Without the faith of his friends, this man would not have been forgiven or healed because he never would have encountered Jesus. Jesus sees *their* faith but he *speaks* to the paralyzed man. ***“Friend, your sins are forgiven.”***

This is when the trouble begins. Just as the arrival of the paralyzed man was unforeseen, so is the sudden introduction of sin. Some of the scribes who were sitting there questioned in their hearts, *“Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”* It is dangerous to hang around Jesus. Even though we do not talk, a look in the eyes, a stiffening of the back, the trace of a frown – might as well be responding to Jesus with a megaphone. Jesus perceives what the scribes are doing and asks why they think these things in their *hearts*, not their minds. In spiritual teaching, the heart is a space deeper than the mind.

Jesus asks them, *“Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk.’”* Neither is easy to say, is it? Did the man’s spiritual condition cause his physical problem? Was he paralyzed by sin so that only God’s forgiveness could restore him to freedom and wholeness? Was he physically paralyzed and in need of healing so he could walk again? Some Biblical writers make a direct connection between one’s spiritual state and one’s physical or financial condition, testifying that the holy person is happy and blessed while those who sin contribute to their own physical and financial ruin (see Psalm 1, Malachi 3, and the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11). There are other Biblical texts such as Luke 6:20-26 and 13:1-5 and John 9:1-3 where Jesus denies that there is any correlation between the hardships and tragedies people experience and their own spiritual condition. In other words, health and prosperity are not always a sign of or the result of God’s blessing. Poverty or physical illness or infirmity are not necessarily punishment for sin.

Regardless of the reason for the man’s condition he is both forgiven and healed. The healing is evidence of Jesus’ power and authority to forgive sins. It is not easy to heal or forgive, but Jesus is willing and has the authority to do both. Sometimes it may

be hard for us to determine whether we need healing or forgiveness or both. In one way or another many of us are paralyzed or enslaved in some aspect of our lives by attitudes, habits, and sins from which we are powerless to free ourselves. The book, *Will Daylight Come*, by Richard Hoefler tells the story of a little boy visiting his grandparents who was given his first sling shot. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit his target. As he came back to Grandma's yard, he saw her pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let the stone fly. The stone hit and the duck fell dead. The boy panicked. Desperately he hid the dead duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, "*Sally, let's wash the dishes.*" But Sally said, "*Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you Johnny?*" And she whispered to him, "*Remember the duck!*" So Johnny did the dishes. Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "*I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper.*" Sally smiled and said, "*That's all taken care of, Jonny wants to do it.*" Again she whispered, "*Remember the duck!*" Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing.

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, finally he couldn't stand it. He confessed to Grandma that he'd killed the duck. "*I know Johnny,*" she said, giving him a hug. "*I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you.*"

It doesn't matter how we've come to be a slave to sin or paralyzed by guilt, it doesn't matter what has taken control of our life so that we are powerless to live as God intends. The good news is Jesus forgives, Jesus heals, Jesus frees.

The man in the gospel is forgiven first and then he is healed. The little boy in the story is forgiven first and then he is freed from the burden of guilt. It is difficult to be healthy and whole when we are burdened by guilt. It isn't helpful either if we are always reminding other people of the dead ducks in their woodpiles. We all have dead ducks in our woodpile.

Unlike the scribes, Jesus is not obsessed with rules or control or lines of authority. His obsession is freeing people. Wouldn't you loved to have been in the house to see the formerly paralyzed man exiting the house carrying the mat he had been carried in on – a walking witness to Jesus' power and authority. The type of authority Jesus exercises is not concerned about "who has the right," it is concerned with authoring new life, about freeing people from paralysis.

Three times in this short gospel story a phrase is repeated with some variation. It is obviously significant.

Rise, take up your mat, and walk.

Rise, take up your mat, and go home.

He rose, immediately took up his mat, and went out before them all.

The command to rise signifies that Jesus sees forgiveness of sins as a form of rising from the dead. Although death usually refers to our bodily demise, we lose life in many ways. Relationships die, creativity declines, productivity fades, finances are lost, zest for living disappears, a way of thinking shrivels – we are continually in the process of dying and rising. The once paralyzed man is told to rise and go home.

The purpose for being forgiven and healed is to reengage his life. The relationships and work that have atrophied during his paralysis can now be revitalized. He stands, takes up his mat, and walks out obediently in front of everyone in the house.

Why is he told though to carry the mat upon which he has been laid?

Is it as a sign of his healing? Thanks to Jesus he has been freed from that which paralyzed him. What he was carried in on he now walks out with.

Is it meant to be a reminder? The mat was the sign of his paralysis. Maybe Jesus wants him to take up his mat as the continuing memory of what was so he will continue to live with mercy and gratitude in his heart. He will not harden into self-righteousness because in his home there will be the mat to remind him of what the Lord did for him.

Is he meant to use it to carry others to Jesus, the Source of healing, as he was carried? Just as he had been saved by the faith of his friends, now his new life mission is to bring new life to others by bringing them to Jesus.

Maybe Jesus wants him to find others who are paralyzed by sin, put them on the mat that once was his, tell them his story of what Jesus did for him, while he carries them as once was carried to Jesus.

Never forgetting that if the door is blocked, the roof can always be opened.

Rise up, take your mat, and walk with Jesus.

Jesus

I am drawn to you this morning

Drawn to you as the gentle loving one

As the generous one
As the welcoming one
As the prayerful one
As the one who is closest to the Father's heart
As the one sealed with the Father's love
As the one knowing deep within your heart
That your work was to proclaim the kingdom

Jesus
How I want to know you
How I want to take a stand about you in my life
To surrender myself to you
To belong to you
To treasure the belief that I have in you

But my love is weak
My faith is restless and so often taken for granted
My self gets in the way and so often blocks you out

O Lord Jesus,
On days when I am especially forgetful, unmindful of you
Lead me gently away with you
As you led your disciples away with you

Reach out to me
Teach me about you
And tell me again how much you love me
Who you are
What it is you ask of me
That you are all I need

O Lord Jesus
I stand before you this morning
In awe of the treasure that you are

And I bless the gracious Father of all
Who sent you into our midst.
Amen.