

A Hole in the Roof

Mark 2 1:1-12

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If you have been around Morningside Presbyterian for even a brief period of time, the words “hole in the roof” will have a certain resonance for you. We have been challenged with more than a few overhead leaks in recent years, and there is nothing that makes my heart sing more than the prospect of having those holes repaired in the not too distant future. Oh, I know some of you will miss watching the progress of the ceiling stain up here to my left. Some of you are aware that one of our long- time Morningside members declares that when the stain first appeared she was sure she could see the image of the baby Jesus. But since then, she says, the entire holy family has appeared.

Today, the gospel reading takes us to another place where there is a hole in the roof. The scene is a house in Capernaum. Jesus has just appeared in Galilee, announcing the kingdom of God and calling all to repent and to believe the good news. Mark, the gospel writer, tells us that Jesus was at home in Capernaum, which was kind of an odd thing for Mark to say because we know that he was from Nazareth. It’s interesting and beautiful, I

think, to realize that Capernaum is where the first disciples that Jesus called came from. This was the home of Peter and Andrew. So quickly, their place became Jesus' home. The bonds of respect, friendship, and love created a new family. The people who wished to see Jesus and to touch him and to be touched by him, to hear his message of hope and transformation were welcome in Peter and Andrew's house.

A lot of people came that day. The place, in fact, was packed. Jesus had healed the sick, cast out demons, and preached such a compelling message that his fame had spread like wildfire around the whole region. So, there they were, front room to back room to bed room, piling in, pushing in, wanting to be close to the one who was filled with a power not of this world.

I have not been on a virtual home tour of Peter and Andrew's house, but I think it's safe to say that it was not a mansion, not even a McMansion. Let's just say it was so crowded that you could not have shoe-horned another person in. Everyone who could get in was listening with rapt attention as Jesus spoke. Then, five more people showed up, hoping to get close to Jesus.

You know how this kind of thing can happen. You can be running late. And when you get to where you're going, there is not room for you. You have no

access. It happens when you want to go to a movie that's gotten great review. A good word is spreading around town, and you don't want to miss it. You go to dinner, and the waiter is a little slow bringing the check. You drive to the theater, but you get there, and you can't find a parking place. Finally, you do and go inside. There are two seats on the first row, and you have to crawl over six people who are already irritated because they are sitting on the first row, and you are dropping kernels of popcorns in their laps as you go along. There is a crush, there is a crowd, there is no place for you.

Five people are late for the big event in Capernaum. I don't know why they were delayed, but I imagine it was because four of the guys could walk and one of them could not move his legs or sit up, and so had to be carried by his friends. When his friends realized there was no way they were, by ordinary means, going to get their friend into close proximity to Jesus, they decided to think out of the box. They climbed up on the roof of the house. They hoisted their friend up after them. Then, they cut a hole in the roof and let their friend down on the pallet on which he lay. And there he was, in the presence of Jesus. No one could know what would happen next, but it is a sure thing that nothing different would ever have happened for the person who needed a healing touch if the person's friends had not been

overwhelmed by a strong sense of ingenuity and determination. They would not stop until they had given access to wholeness to the person whom they cared about. It was their determination that changed inaccessibility into accessibility.

Mark does not sketch out the scene as much as I wish he had. He tells us what people said, but he does not show us what people did. I wonder if, as the man lay on the palette before him, Jesus stood over him and leaned down. I don't think so. I think he would have sat down, at least sat down, on the floor beside him. Don't you think he probably sat with him? Maybe he even lay down beside him, with his elbow on the floor, resting his head on his hand. Perhaps he spoke to him, eye to eye, "I see your human dignity. I honor your struggle. I want to make your life whole. What Mark does tell us is that Jesus said the most striking thing, "When Jesus saw **their** faith, [that is, the faith of the man's friends], he said to the man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'"

What? Your sins are forgiven? Their faith has created a new future for someone else. Their faith was the means by which the hopelessness of a current circumstance became the hope for an unimagined tomorrow.

I will talk in a moment about the power and authority of Jesus to heal and to forgive, but I want say one further good word about friendship. Were it not for this man's friends, the door to his future would have remained closed. This much, at least, I know. Friendship heals. Likely this is not news to you. Something heartbreaking or life threatening happens in your life and there they are, your pals, with kind words, with chicken salad, with a simple way of being there that somehow gets you through. I'm telling you, friends can save your life. Friends can open the door to new possibilities in your life you never even imagined. We simply cannot be human on our own. The conventional wisdom says something different. Conventional wisdom these days emphasizes autonomy and individuality. We even talk of the concept of the nuclear family, an idea that seems to imply that families are little self-contained units floating out there, independent of one another in apartment complexes and subdivisions, our main connections with are outside world being the Internet and Dominoes Delivers.

Nonsense. Life is about community and connectedness. John Dunn had it exactly right, "No man is an island, entire unto himself." To be human is to love and care for one another.

Jesus was willing to lay down his life for his friends. In his act of self-giving love, God became a friend forever with the world. The Quakers call their

faith community a “society of friends.” I love that expression. God help our congregation to be a society of friends, a place where everyone has access, regardless of mental capacity or health or illness. Regardless of physical capacity or disability, there is a place for everyone in the community of friends. I think of the little church Al and I joined when we had one baby and another on the way. We were lonely. We were looking for people who might come to know us by name. That was almost forty years ago and the friendships we made then, in the church, still sustain. We’ve celebrated weddings and gone through divorces and helped one another survive breast cancer and career disappointments and argued over politics and borne with each other the indignities brought on by age. We pray for one another.

There is true healing in friendship. Every time we live out kindness, every time we make sure that someone who is on the outside, either categorically or any other way, is ushered in to the presence of that which will heal and make whole, the pallet comes down, again, through the hole in the roof, and another human being has the opportunity to be touched with the power that can make them whole.

I think of a friend that I had in the church I served in Chicago. It was a big church, almost 6,000 members. One of my best pals in that congregation was a woman who I’m not sure could even be a part of this congregation.

You know why? Because she couldn't move most of her body. She used a knob on the arm of her wheel chair to steer herself around, because she was almost completely paralyzed by MS. The disease had struck in the midst of the vital life she was living as an executive serving with the Girl Scout organization. Sue Duffy could only move a few muscles. She sat in a chair with a head brace. She said that after she was diagnosed, she went home from church one day so depressed, she did not know what to do. As she struggled to decide whether or not she ought to go on, she heard the voice of God speak to her.

When she told me this story, I was surprised, because Sue was not the kind of person who usually talked this way.

"You did?" I said. "What did God say?"

She said, "I heard God say, 'Don't be ridiculous, Sue. I've got lots of things for you to do.'" To make a long story short, for years, she chaired the Welcome committee of one of the largest Protestant churches in the United States. She would say to all the new members, "You'll always know where to find me. I'll always be parked behind the second pillar on the left. I cannot come to say hello to you, but I promise you, if you come to me, I'll remember your name." Just because she couldn't move didn't mean that she couldn't keep on reducing the deficit of kindness in the world. She did not

get the miracle of healing, but she received the miracle of the healing of her imagination insofar as her own future was concerned. She died this November, and I give thanks to God for her life. She didn't get the miracle of physical healing, but she transformed other people's lives.

In the story Mark tells, the man who was paralyzed didn't ask for anything, but he received two gifts. First, Jesus forgave his sins. What sins they were was between the man and his Maker. Then, he was given the gift of the healing of his body. In Jesus' day, people believed that sin and illness were connected. We rightfully reject that notion in modern times, though it is interesting. I spoke with a friend last week who has lung cancer. He said that he has learned that there is not much support in the public sphere for people with lung cancer because the assumption is you did it to yourself.

The point Mark wants to make is that Christ has the power to heal and to forgive. In both ways we are made whole. There is no better reason for the church of Jesus Christ to exist than to share the Good News that there is a new power, a new force for life now active in the world. I believe that Morningside Church exists to bear witness to the fact that God is doing a new thing. I believe that this particular moment in the life of our congregation is a genuinely new kind of moment, filled with unique possibility. I believe that we really can transform this old building into the

house of God you and I want it to be, where everybody can get around and get in just fine. It is not going to be easy for us to undergo transformation, but I believe it is possible. The question is not financial resources. The question is not the faithfulness of God. The only variable factors will be whether or not we will have faith in the power of God, whether we will have the imagination to see what needs to be done and then the ingenuity to get it done.

I believe God is already doing a new thing in our midst. Through Morningside, God is already healing many human spirits that have been damaged by the abrasive messages of the churches from which they have come. There is healing going on here for those who have gotten the message that they are no good or they are categorically unacceptable to God.

We offer an alternative message here. We encourage those who have become lost in an endless cycle of victimization and incapacity, people who are used to being broken. Here, through the presence and ministry of this congregation people are being touched by the healing power of Christ.

Let's fix the holes in the roof, those places where the water leaks in, and, at the same time, let us build the kind of church that is full of a healing, forgiving Spirit of Christ. Here, may people come and find life in all its abundance. Amen.