

The Incident at Capernaum
Mark 2:1-12
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For the past five years, one of my annual Lenten practices has been to read Reynolds Price's extraordinary autobiographical book, "A Whole New Life." As the book begins, Price is a middle-aged scholar at Duke University, a tenured English professor and a critically acclaimed novelist. He is successful and satisfied in every way. Then, in the Spring of 1984, a colleague noticed that Price was having trouble lifting one of his feet as they walked together. Within a few weeks, he has received the grim news that there was an 8-inch tumor wrapped around his spine. No operation could promise to fully remove it. Privately, the physicians agreed he could not have more than 18 months to live. The pain grew until it was devastating.

Price eloquently describes the months of sickening treatments, the agonies of physical therapy, and a variety of remedies that attempted to relieve his pain. As a religious man, he turned to prayer and scripture, although he notes he didn't find any quick relief. Then, at a particularly hopeless and bleak moment, Price had a vision. His description is stunning, "I was suddenly not propped in my brass bed or even contained in my familiar house. By the dim new, thoroughly credible light that rose around me, it was barely dawn; and I was lying fully dressed in modern street clothes on a slope by a lake I knew at once." In the vision, Price saw himself at the Sea of Galilee with Jesus and the twelve disciples. Jesus summoned Price to wade out into the water. He writes, "Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back until water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke once—"Your sins are forgiven"—and turned to shore again, done with me. I came behind him, thinking in standard greedy fashion, 'It's not my sins I'm worried about.' So to Jesus' receding back I had the gall to say, 'Am I also cured?' He turned to face me, no sign of a smile, and finally said two words, 'That too.' Then he climbed from the water not looking around, really done with me. I followed him out and then with no palpable seam in the texture of time and place, I was home again in my wide bed."

We at Morningside are traveling with Jesus this Lent, walking with him on a journey that leads to Jerusalem. This morning, we encounter Jesus early in his Galilean ministry, and we hear a memorable and dramatic story. In second grade, my Sunday School teacher, Ms. Moore, read it aloud to us in a particularly theatrical way. We were all mesmerized by the vivid imagery: a huge crowd filling the house and all of the doorways; Jesus standing in the center of the house teaching the hordes of people who had assembled; four men carrying a friend who could not walk up onto the roof—and then, in a riveting and almost comical way, these same men digging through the roof to lower their friend into the crowded house.

After we heard the story, Ms. Moore asked us to draw the scene as we saw it in our minds, and I was stopped short. Anyone who knows me well can attest that part of the reason for this was my decided lack of artistic ability, which I discovered at a young age. I simply could not draw as well as Katie Bailey, who sat next to me creating the scene with the grace and focus of Michelangelo at the Sistine Chapel. But my difficulty went deeper than that. I could not draw the scene because there was too much to capture in once scene. Overwhelmed, I sat silently, until the class was over, with a blank sheet of construction paper in front of me. Those in the crowd gathered to see and hear Jesus captured my sentiments precisely, “we have never seen anything like this before.”

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There is the crowd itself, which has grown considerably in the short time that Jesus has been involved in public ministry. In Mark, whose gospel moves at a furious pace, Jesus returns from the wilderness temptations, calls the first disciples, and immediately begins a ministry of teaching and healing in the synagogues throughout Galilee. Early on, in the first chapter of the gospel, Mark tells us that, “his fame began to spread throughout the region.” From this point until the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus struggles with the constant presence of a multitude of followers. Perhaps those who stood amazed had simply never seen anyone attract such a vast following in such a short time.

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Then there is the undeterred single-mindedness of those four men who brought their friend to hear and be healed by Jesus. Finding the door blocked and the room well beyond capacity, their commitment to their friend leads them to a creative solution to the problem, climbing atop the mud roof and digging a hole to lower him into Jesus’ literal midst. Surely few in the crowd had seen anything like that before. Jesus himself stops in the middle of his teaching and Mark says that he “sees their faith.”

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The part of the story that some, Mark calls them the scribes, saw as most unthinkable and most offensive, was what Jesus does next. Seeing the faith of his friends, Jesus pronounces to the paralyzed man: “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Like Professor Price, the man may have been tempted to respond that this forgiveness was well and good but not exactly what he had hoped to receive. But before he can get a word in, Jesus senses frustration and anger from the scribes who had come to hear Jesus teach. The offense was blasphemy—speaking as if he were God; forgiving sin in a way that only God can forgive. The dispute between Jesus and the scribes that begins here will accompany us throughout our Lenten pilgrimage, all the way to Jerusalem, where the religious

authorities will accuse and condemn Jesus of blasphemy—claiming that he is God.

At this point in the story, Jesus responds to the silent dissension in the room by raising a question of his own: which is easier, to forgive sins or to heal paralysis? Perhaps we would be tempted to interject our modern, scientifically-informed perspective into the debate. Of course it is easier to forgive sins! For the scribes, this simply would not have been the case. Forgiveness, in Jesus' time and place, required acts of sacrifice and repentance that had to be verified by a religious expert. When Jesus heals a leper in the passage immediately before this one, he commands the healed man to go and show himself to a priest to be purified. The process of atoning for sin was a complicated one. There were many healers roaming the Galilean countryside in Jesus' day, but only God could proclaim forgiveness.

Leaving the question hanging in the air, Jesus tells the paralyzed man to stand up, take his mat, and go home. Though it may be the easier of the two, from the perspective of the paralyzed man it is the most significant. Not only does he stand and take the mat, he presents himself to the crowd as a healed man. At this moment, the crowd gives glory to God.

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May I submit to you, on this Lenten Sunday morning, that the forgiveness offered by Jesus is a form of healing? Throughout this pilgrimage with Jesus, and throughout the gospel of Mark, we will encounter Jesus forgiving sins and healing bodies. The two appear to go hand-in-hand in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

One point of clarification must be plainly and quickly made. Jesus' actions in this story does **not** support the view that man's paralysis is the result of his sin. This misguided interpretation has given rise to all kinds of harmful and hurtful responses. A friend of mine once described how her pastor had come to visit her in the hospital just before a serious and anxiety-producing surgery. In his prayer, the pastor asked God to forgive my friend for whatever she had done to deserve this illness. My friend did not return to church for nearly two decades, so deeply hurt was she by this prayer. In Mark's story, Jesus offers forgiveness and healing. The man's paralysis is not cured as a result of having his sins forgiven. The two are distinct and yet both give the paralyzed man a form of freedom. The forgiveness that Jesus offers frees the man from bondage to guilt and shame that accompanied physically disabled people in the Ancient world. He is given assurance that he is forgiven, and therefore the freedom to love himself and others.

As you know, it has become popular in some Christian circles in recent years to ask the question, often as a kind of litmus test, "When were you saved?" The logic behind the question is that all of us have one moment when we accept the

salvation of God once and for all. That may be true for some. My inclination, however, is to answer the question as truthfully as I know how, "I am saved, forgiven, freed, many times each day." The salvation of God does not come as a one-time gift, but is more like a waterfall that is always flooding our lives with the grace and forgiveness of God. We are absolved not once in our lives, nor twice but regularly. We need the renewing power of God's forgiveness as much as we need food or water or air.

Several years ago, a woman went to a church conference. During the week, after some trust had been built, she found herself chatting with a preacher from another denomination. In the course of the conversation, he mentioned that on an average Sunday morning, he rarely preached for less than an hour. "I don't mean to be disrespectful," she said, "but why do you go on for so long?" He smiled and said, "What do you mean?" "In my church," she said, "people squirm if it goes on any longer than 59 minutes." He said, "Lady, I preach to people who have been told all week that they don't amount to anything. The world tells them they have no value, that they're worthless. It takes me a good long while to get it through to them that the world is telling them a lie. The world says to them, 'You're a nobody,' but I stand up in my pulpit and say, 'That's not true. In Jesus Christ, you're somebody. You are loved with an infinite love.'"

He said, "All week the world tries to take something away from my people but when Sunday comes, I'm going to take as much time as I need to speak the gospel and to let God give something back to them."

The paralyzed man received so much more than the ability to walk on that day in Capernaum. He received what Paul calls the "glorious freedom of the children of God." With the pronouncement that his sins had been forgiven, he was given a gift beyond measure. He was freed to love and forgive and live out his faith in the world. He was given the ability to look outward to others in great need. As his friends had lifted him up and lowered him into Jesus' presence, so he could now do the same for them.

This Thursday, in this sanctuary, we celebrated the life of Beverly Tatum, a beloved member of this congregation who had such an impact on all of us with whom she came into contact. In recent years, Beverly suffered from extreme pain and in ways that medication could not control, her body rejecting nearly every treatment that the doctors could prescribe. But Beverly Tatum was a woman who knew the glorious gift of forgiveness and the freedom and joy that it brings. In the midst of her deepest suffering, she remained primarily concerned with others. I can remember visiting her when she had just moved, under her own power, to Hospice Atlanta. I held her hand and asked how she was feeling. She would have none of that—"I heard that Greg Morton has had the flu, how is he doing?" The gift of forgiveness is the gift of freedom—though she was never cured, Beverly Tatum had been healed, and given the ability to live for others.

Reynolds Price was never physically cured. His cancer eventually diminished due to treatments, but he will remain in a wheelchair the rest of his life. Still the vision of Jesus that day erased any superstitious feeling that his sickness came as a punishment, for he heard Jesus say he was forgiven. The experience also held him close to the heart of God even when his illness threatened to tear him away.

The point is, Reynolds Price didn't just get something. He got something back. Some piece of his life was given back and restored by the presence of Jesus Christ. He closes the book with these remarkable words, "Even my handwriting looks very little like the script of the man I was in June of 1984. Cranky as it is, it's taller, more legible, with more air and stride. It comes down the arm of a grateful man." (193)

And the crowd, all clustered in there with Jesus, with one voice, said, "we never saw anything like this."

We never saw a Savior who wanted to reach out beyond his inner circle in order to save. We never knew a Lord who took delight in having his house wrecked in order that people in need might get to him. We never ever saw a Messiah who reached out beyond the bounds of the saved in order to touch the lost. We never saw someone freely offer the forgiveness of God that so many long to hear and believe. We never saw anything like this.

Thanks be to God, we have.