

Carried with Compassion

Mark 2:1-12

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1 When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3 Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? 10 But so that you may know that the Son of Humanity has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— 11 "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." 12 And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

I am better at giving than receiving. In fact, sometimes it is hard for me to accept help. I can be a little stubborn at times thinking that I can handle life and all my responsibilities and challenges on my own.

But there have been times in my life when I was brought to my knees literally and figuratively. God showed me that I needed help, healing, grace and strength from the one who is the Creator and Lover of the universe.

It was March 1998. I was driving back from a time of conversation and study with other women pastors in Davis. Jeffrey and I had started a new Presbyterian Church in Elk Grove south of Sacramento and I was driving home. It had been raining hard but it finally stopped. I was driving on I-5 when all the sudden the cars in front of me came to a sudden stop. I slammed on my brakes and then was hit from behind and then from the side. I could not open my door and had to climb out the window. I was taken to the hospital. My body and neck and back were bruised. My car was totaled. It was a traumatic experience, but I was going to be okay. It was going to take time to heal.

I was a busy pastor. What did it mean to stop and rest and let my body heal from the accident? It meant letting people bring meals and take Jackson to preschool. It meant letting people clean the house and do the grocery shopping. Our friends and congregation carried me, carried us. It was an amazing gift. I learned I needed many kinds of healing. The Holy One had much to teach me.

Sometimes help and compassion are offered and we are simply amazed. When Jeffrey and I were starting a new church in Pocono Mountains of PA and were meeting for worship services in a middle school, a wonderful couple started attending. Linda was a dressmaker and Walter was a contractor who worked in NYC rehabbing apartments. I remember the day Linda asked me to come over to her house. With tears in her eyes, she said had been diagnosed with invasive breast cancer. The doctor said chemo would be given an hour north in Scranton. How could she go with Walter working in NYC? I said, "The church will help you. We will put a team together of people who will drive you." She was in shock. "People in the church would do that? I have never been part of a church that would do that." It was hard for her to accept the gift of help. And then she did. And so we did. We cared for Linda for those few months of treatment – prayers, rides to and from chemo, food, help with her young daughter. That is the church at its best. A few months later when I preached on this scripture, she stood up during sharing joys and concerns and said, "That is what you all did. You carried me. And now I am well. Thank you."

I wonder if the paralyzed man in our story from Mark was uncomfortable when his friends offered to help him. "You can't carry me all that way. It is too much for you." Or maybe he felt scared. "I'm afraid you are going to drop me." Or had mixed feelings. "I don't think Jesus can do anything, but I guess it's worth a try." Or maybe he was grateful from the beginning. "Thank you for being such good friends."

The friends have heard that Jesus is a great healer and teacher and they want to get their friend to Jesus. So they carried him.

When they arrived, a crowd had filled the house to capacity and had jammed the porch area around the door, and spilling into the street. People were all eagerly listening to what Jesus had to say. People wanted to learn. They packed the place. And Jesus taught them.

They started to move toward Jesus. The crowd stopped them. They couldn't get to Jesus. The room was full.

Now, if you were one of the friends, what would your reaction be? Suggest we come back later? Politely wait in line? Make a hole in the roof? Go along with the hole in the roof, but make it clear it was not your idea? The homes in Jesus time had outdoor stairs to lead to a flat roof made of dirt and branches.

The men had compassion for their friend. Their hope was that Jesus the healer and teacher could help him. Their friend was vulnerable. And because physical defects were seen as caused by some kind of sin or divine punishment, the paralyzed man would have been an “other,” outsider, less than.

The friends walk up the outside steps carrying their friend. They move the branches around on the flat roof and lower him down on a palette.

Jesus sees – sees him and sees his friends. They are in the presence of the source of Love. The friends long for their friend to be made whole, be made well.

Here is a glimpse of the essence of our spiritual lives in that moment – truly seen, vulnerable, in our bodies, carrying whatever burdens we have, paralyzed by fears or regret. Physical ailments and spiritual.

Jesus speaks into this reality, this Kairos moment, no longer seeing the man as “other.”

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Sin – *hamartia* – missing the mark. Parts of life that are not authentic, are not loving, errors in judgment, not in sync with Divine Love.

Forgiven - ‘forgive’ is not the primary meaning of ἀφίενται, *aphientai*. “Forgive” comes fourth in the Greek Bible lexicon of meanings. The primary meaning of this word is to ‘send away.’ It makes me think that the ‘scapegoat’ may be a primary image in the word when it comes to how sins are ‘sent away’. In the Hebrew scriptures, priests would place all the “sins” of the people on a goat and send the goat into the wilderness.

I think there be a different feel to our understanding of sin and the taking away of sins if we used ‘sent away’ rather than ‘forgiven’ in our language? “Beloved Son, Beloved Daughter, your errors and flaws are sent away.” You are unburdened and unbound.

Compassion brings an unburdening. An encounter with Love Incarnate means being seen, offered words of healing and wholeness, a power that says – you are more than your burdens/regrets/failures/attempts. Beloved child, you are unburdened.

So this happens first before the man stands.

How might that happen in our lives? How do we stay open to moments to be unburdened?

Jesus perceived that the man was both socially and physically bound. While others saw defect, he saw the need for freedom and hope.

Jesus couldn't have healed the paralytic if the man's friends hadn't been part of the project. He wouldn't have known about him. They had to work to get in to see Jesus. They were determined. Underlying their action, I think it was this: they loved their friend a lot. They hated what his illness and pain was doing to him. Love was the force that propelled them forward into such extreme action. It made them brave—foolish, some of the onlookers might have said, but brave and compassionate.

Who are the people in your life who carried you when you were in physical pain or emotional pain or spiritual pain? When you were bound and needed release? Who are the friends who cared enough about you to bring you into the loving presence of Divine Mystery? Who has helped you stand?

If you had friends or people in your life who would support you in our journey for healing today, what kind of healing or freedom would seek? Physical, Spiritual, Emotional, healing in relationships, ...? Freedom from bitterness, from regret, from the errors in judgment in the past, freedom from worry, freedom from fear....

A story of compassion and empathy. Something moved those 4 friends to carry their friend to Christ. Their boldness, their faith, their love. We cannot carry every person, but we can see and be part of living into the reality of the Beloved Community as Dr. King suggested. We need each other. It is both personal acts of kindness and larger efforts of justice making and peace making that we carry each other.

Sometimes we may be that person being carried. Sometimes we are part of the crowd in the house needing to hear the words and teachings. Sometimes we are one of the friends. How is our church seen in the community? Are we standing with our neighbors in need? There is carrying and standing with that can keep us open to the Spirit that deepens our connection to one another.

And yet there have been recent times that I and probably many of you have a sort of emotional low-grade fever brought on by the pandemic, political upheaval, the national call for racial reckoning and, for many of us, personal loss as well. I think there are times we need to lament, to acknowledge our weariness. And then pray for enough strength and openness and hope for today.

At the end of our story from Mark, Jesus offered a healing blessing and the man who was paralyzed stood up, took up his mat, and walked out the door. And according to Mark, The people were amazed and glorifying God saying, "**We never saw anything like this.**"

I wonder if maybe this was an all-encompassing expression. The whole scene that day was a lesson in God's love for each person. Not only had the people never witnessed a healing so miraculous, but maybe they had never before seen the love of friends to be so bold, so

creative, so intentional, so courageous, so tenacious. On that day, Divine love was made real in the details of ingenious friends who carried and walked and stood by their friend that he might have abundant life and walked out on his own.

Close with a story about standing with. Jeffrey has reminded me that spring training will be starting soon so it appropriate to end with a baseball story today.

In his first seasons with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Jackie Robinson, faced racial hatred and venom nearly everywhere he traveled--fastballs at his head, spikings on the bases, brutal epithets from the opposing dugouts and from the crowds. During one game in Boston, the taunts and racial slurs seemed to reach a peak. In the midst of this, another Dodger, a Southern white named Pee Wee Reese, called timeout. He walked from his position at shortstop toward Robinson at second base, put his arm around Robinson's shoulder, and stood there with him for what seemed like a long time. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career. The gesture spoke more eloquently than the words: This man is my friend.

May we be grateful for good friends who stand with us and help carry us and pray for us.
May we join in this movement of Christ's love, as vulnerable and authentic people.
May we practice compassion and empathy now and when we gather together again.

There is room in God's house for all of us.

We belong God no matter what.

And we belong to each other no matter what.

In Christ we have been set free for a life of real connection
to the Spirit of the Living God and other people. Amen.