

If You Need A Helping Hand
Mark 2: 1-12

The other evening I was watching a football game, which I know comes as a shock to you. Sadly, my team of choice did not win, though it was an excellent game with quite the dramatic ending. As usual, penalties abounded. One of the more frequent is offsides, a relatively minor infraction. Both teams line up along the scrimmage line waiting for just the right moment to take action, and inevitably at last one over-eager defender will jump across the line before the ball is snapped. When my older son played football and we were dissecting a game one Friday night, I naively asked him why the players did not wait but jumped early. It seemed so logical just to be more careful and avoid the penalty. He gave me an insider's view of the game and spoke of the adrenaline and emotion that surges through a player as they prepare and of the intellectual planning that goes into each move. It's a lot more complex than it appears with so much brimming beneath the surface. Inside each player is a person teeming with energy, with ideas, with a mission, just looking for the opportunity to move.

The Gospel of Mark is a bit like that. It seems to surge across the scrimmage line before it is quite ready. 'Beginning the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God' is the pronouncement as the floodgates of Mark open.¹ No lead-in story, no explanation of where and why Jesus is there, no background material at all. It plunges into action, scrambling to tell the story, eager to draw its listeners into the story of Jesus. To read it in English reveals a jerking narrative, one that lurches from event to event with little, if any, transition smoothing the way. In Greek its grammar is rough and terse. Sentences are often incomplete, and '*kai euthos*' threads its way throughout the gospel. And immediately. And immediately Jesus came out of the water, and immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, and immediately he called the disciples, and immediately he went into the synagogue. Seven times in the first chapter alone! As action packed as any football game, the first chapter has Jesus going from obscurity to being known

¹ Mark 1: 1 my translation

throughout the land. And there was more to come. The author of the gospel of Mark had an urgent story to tell, a burning message to share, a mission brimming inside him that needed to go into all the world.

At the time of Jesus it was customary to gather in homes for teachings, lively discussions, and debates. Rarely were there community centers. Even synagogues were more often in someone's house rather than a specifically designated building. So it was no surprise that people came together when they learned Jesus was in town. From the other gospels we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and moved to Nazareth. Now he called the small fishing village of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee home. Because of his popularity the house was overflowing with people. As Jesus was speaking, light poured into the house from the roof. The Greek is humorous in this portion of the text, for they 'unroofed the roof!' As everyone watched in amazement, a paralytic on a mat was lowered into their midst. We know nothing about this person other than the physical condition of some sort of paralysis. No details at all - no name, not even a gender. Just a person, a non-person really, known only by his or her disability. In the society of the day, this person would have been an outcast in all ways. Living in a state of perpetual uncleanness, they would not have been allowed in the Temple to worship, which limited interactions in all areas of life. They would not have been invited for dinner to someone's home. Most likely the person would have been homeless, forced to beg for even scraps. Ignored, rejected, scorned, this person would have no place mark in the world except on the periphery. Driving this shunning was a deep-seated attitude that somehow this person, and all others with problems like this, were deserving of their fate. They, or their parents, must have done something wrong to incur the wrath of God in such a way. In that world, if you were disabled, poor, mixed in heritage, in any way different, it was because of sin. More often than not, the world built a collective wall to hold you at arm's length, to keep you from contaminating them in any way, to remind you they were better than you, and most tragic of all, it was all your fault. What a lonely, miserable existence!

But this particular person did have a few friends, friends who were so bold as to unroof the roof and lower the person into the house where Jesus taught. Friends willing to risk their own reputations, even their own religious purification to come to the aid of someone who could not seek help alone. A daring, courageous, outrageous, and decidedly unwise move for all.

No doubt conversation came to a shocking standstill and an awkward silence descended as the man was eased into the room on his mat. Did people pull away, repulsed because of the sinful paralytic? Would they, too, become unclean now? Did they begin to condemn those cautiously guiding the person and placing him at Jesus' feet? Or maybe they thought Jesus could do something. After all, he had already healed so many. Perhaps he could do it again.

Now if Jesus had simply healed the person and tied the story up with a neat knot, it would have been so much easier. Instead he turned to the person and said, "Child, your sins are forgiven."² The stillness that settled into the room as the man was placed on the floor now became a most uncomfortable silence. As a therapist turned pastor, I cannot see where that response would have been helpful under the circumstances. When someone is hurting and alone, they don't want to hear that they are at fault! Yet Jesus' relating the paralytic's condition to sin was not startling in that context. But there was a problem. *Only God could forgive sins.* For the first time in Mark's gospel a fissure began to form between Jesus and the religious authorities. For the first time the accusation 'blasphemy' was hurled toward Jesus. How dare Jesus claim to forgive sins, something reserved exclusively for God! According to Leviticus, the penalty for blasphemy was straightforward - death. And it's only the beginning of the second chapter of Mark.

On that day, to the amazement of all, Jesus boldly asserted his identity as the Son of God. The crowds expected Jesus to heal the paralytic as he had done with so many others; the scribes expected the opportunity for a good discussion with this learned, fascinating teacher; no one expected the Messiah was among them. As the once-paralyzed person picked up his mat

² Mark 2: 5b NRSV. Note: 'son' in the NRSV has been replaced with 'child', which is the Greek term used.

and walked through the crowd, they all exclaimed, "We have never seen anything like this!"³

This was not only the healing of one person but the beginning of wholeness for the world.

Much has been and will continue to be said about the healings of Jesus. Aberrations of nature, miracles, whatever they are called, they were outside the norms of expectations. Healing, though, was as old as Judaism. In the time of Jesus, the priesthood was declining in power and influence, and magician healers worked among the people.⁴ As amazing and welcome as they were for the people who followed Jesus, healings alone did not set Jesus apart. Beneath the miracles of Jesus was another story - the building of community, a community that was unlike anything that had been experienced.

This community was created, not to welcome people into a proscribed fold, but to tear down the walls and open the gates to welcome the world - especially those who had been left out for so long. For Jesus community was not a political or religious entity but one of connection with one another. As author John Pavlovitz said, "Jesus was far more relational than he was theological."⁵ With the community that Jesus built - and is still building - he brought life and wholeness to a wounded world. For the paralytic the healing was miraculous, enabling him or her to walk freely around. But beyond the physical cure was the restoration to life itself. He could breathe, go to market and work, talk and laugh with friends and family, worship at synagogue. Community reached out its arms and enfolded him in the arms of life itself.

That is what true community does. At its best, it brings life. For the paralytic community began when some people had compassion for this person and dared the convention of the culture to help find life and wholeness for someone who had known only pain, solitude, rejection. Community rejoiced when he found his way into the world as a whole person with life filling his heart. It sounds like it would be noble, even the most right action for us, yet its reality

³ Mark 2: 12b NRSV

⁴ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/biblical-healing/>

⁵ John Pavlovitz. *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopefully Spiritual Community*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2017.

is unsettling. To be community for others we have to reach beyond ourselves and experience the world through the eyes and hearts of another. Community must be grounded in compassion in order for it to be authentic.

If, as the people of Jesus' time did, we equate a person's status or condition with sin, then we will always have a dichotomy of deserving and undeserving, of the ones who have Jesus and the ones who don't. Consciously or not, that is what we more often do. We reach out to *them*, the unfortunate, the poor, the ill, the unsaved. No doubt, our hearts have the right motivation, and we can positively impact the world when we act in gracious, loving generosity. But it's from an attitude of superiority. We do not and cannot create community in the way of Jesus Christ. For in community we become acutely aware of the suffering, the pain, the injustice of life, and we enter the messiness of such a world. We walk alongside them until there is no us and them, just 'we' making our way through this world together. No, it does not mean that we all need to go to the inner city to truly understand what a life of poverty can be. We don't have to travel to Africa or Haiti or Puerto Rico or wherever overwhelming needs proliferate. To begin what we must do is create community in our hearts, realizing that we are all God's children and we are all on this journey of life as one. That sense of community is the driving force for all our living. It becomes the causes we support, the ways we interact with every person we encounter, the decisions we make on how we will live and who we will be.

We can never become blind to the paralytics among us. When I was in Austin, Texas, I worked at a church in the center of the city in an area where the homeless and the working poor often congregated. Over my time there I learned to ignore the pain, to drive around the long lines of day workers who gathered every morning, to even step over someone sleeping on the steps of the church where I worked, to not even recognize their humanity. Not my proudest moment. Yet so very easy to do, especially when it seems anguish is all around, engulfing us from all sides, creating a numbing and paralysis of the soul. As we become immune to life

around us in all its forms as part of God's beloved, pieces of our heart begin to die as well. We abdicate our call to be life for the world.

Though church was created to be the epitome of community, it is but one expression of it. Community comes in a myriad of forms, morphing with time and circumstance, but it is always held together by a love that transcends the individuals and causes within it. Whether it be on a march with those who embrace similar passions, an evening of music and friendship on a Saturday evening, phone calls and visits of support with those who are hurting, community happens when we become aware of the humanity of others and our interactions bring life for a moment, for a season, for a lifetime. Our very faith is rooted in the question - do we bring life by recognizing the humanity of others and lifting them up? With each and every decision we make as a community of faith, with every action we take, that should be the question we ask ourselves. Our mission to the world might be large in the ways in which we become involved and support organizations that do so much for the hurting in the world. Or it might be more localized in projects closer to home. With our faith as a springboard, bringing life becomes who we are and how we present ourselves to the community around us, in the attitude of acceptance and welcome we generate, in the caring we show one another and those in our lives, in the many ways we make our faith real. Consider how that one question could change your life, how it could change us as a community of faith, how it can transform the world. How can we become life for the world?

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