

## ***Confronting Mercy***

A Morning Message for Worship on the Third Sunday of Lent  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
February 28, 2016  
Text: Mark 2:1-12

This morning's text from Mark is a wonderful story about the extraordinary lengths to which four friends were willing to go to get help for a sick friend. He was paralyzed, one of the few details provided in the text about these five individuals who forced an encounter with Jesus against all odds. We know the paralytic was a man but we do not know if all four friends who carried him to Jesus were men because the text just says "four people." They were probably four men, but not necessarily. Were they relatives? A wife or mother or sister perhaps? A brother, or a son perhaps? We just don't know. All we do know is that their relationship with the sick man was such that they were willing to do just about anything to get him in front of Jesus.

Extraordinary as their actions were, it should be noted that cutting a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was would not be as difficult to do as we might imagine. The house would have been a one story affair with a flat roof. And, since the roof was often used as additional space for relaxing in the cool evening breezes or for storage of items, there would have been an outside staircase leading up to the roof for this determined band of friends to use. Once on the roof, it would have been a fairly

simple task to figure out which section of the mud thatch to remove in order to lower their friend down into the room. What is remarkable is that, obviously, this would have caused a commotion right over Jesus' head and yet no one appears to have noticed or gone to investigate. Even when the roof section was removed, and the sunlight streamed in, Jesus kept right on talking to the people crammed into that tiny space, almost like it was supposed to be happening just that way.

So, the hole is complete and the four friends grab hold of their four ropes, each on one corner of the sick man's pallet, and they slowly lower him down. Now, let's stop right there for a moment and consider how difficult that task would have been! Have you ever tried to work ropes connected to something along with three other people? That's hard! You have to be doing the same thing with four ropes at the same time! That's hard enough to do if you're just lowering something like a pallet of supplies. Can you imagine if you were trying to lower a stretcher with an incapacitated person on it? But, they did. And there was their friend just dangling in the air right in front of Jesus.

And then what does the text say? It's pretty clear – “when Jesus saw *their* faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘your sins are forgiven.’” So, it's pretty clear that what impressed Jesus here was the faith of the four friends, the four people who put all that effort in getting this sick person in front of Jesus. They were so sure

Jesus could help their friend that they would not settle for anything less than getting their friend right in front of him, even if that meant cutting a hole in the roof and taking the risk of lowering him down right in front of Jesus. It was *their* faith Jesus was responding to. They were determined to do everything in their power to get the help their friend needed, and they were convinced Jesus could and would provide that help. So, in a very real way, Jesus was confronted by their determination to find mercy, to find assistance and healing for their friend. They did not stay meekly and passively at the back of the crowd, waiting to see if they could get Jesus' attention as he left the house at some later time. They did not settle for the *possibility* of mercy for their friend. They created the circumstances in which Jesus was confronted by their friend's need for mercy and he responded as they had hoped, trusted, believed he would.

We have might wonder, though, if he did respond as they thought he would. I mean, after all, Jesus didn't lay hands on the sick man and say "be healed" and he was. Nope. What Jesus said in response to the faith of the four friends was something else altogether. He said to the sick man, " 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" Now, to us, this sounds like a strange thing to say to a sick person. Telling someone their sins are forgiven when they've come to you for healing just doesn't seem very helpful, from our 21<sup>st</sup> century point of view. But, the truth is, it is exactly what this

person would have wanted to hear because in that culture illness and sin were, in Jesus' day, directly linked. Sickness was seen as an indication that you had done something to offend God. You were sick because you had sinned. Therefore, the first step in healing someone would be for them to find some mechanism for their sins to be forgiven.

This is why the scribes who were there listening to Jesus and witnessing all this had a fit when Jesus addressed the sick man by saying his sins were forgiven. This was blasphemy and as the official guardians of God's law they were the ones to know blasphemy when they saw it! Only the priests in the Temple could forgive sins and then only after a very complicated series of rituals performed by the priests on behalf of the person at great expense. Who did Jesus think he was to go around just telling people their sins were forgiven? This was foolish and dangerous! Of course, Jesus couldn't forgive sins. That just wasn't possible.

Jesus knew right away that the scribes were upset by what he had done. This was not how forgiveness from God was supposed to be handled! How could he possibly forgive sins? And if he couldn't forgive sins, he couldn't possibly heal this man. Something was very, very wrong – or so they thought. And Jesus confronts them head on. He says, “ ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier – to say to the man your sins are forgiven or to say stand up, take your mat and walk?’”

And then, to prove his point – that he can forgive sins – Jesus says to the sick man exactly that – “stand, take up your mat and go home.” And the man does. Jesus thus proves to the scribes and everyone else that he does have the power to forgive sins. Simply put, if the man’s sins had not been forgiven, he could not, would not, have been healed. For Jesus, for the paralyzed man, for his friends, for the crowd, for the scribes, for everyone who saw this extraordinary thing happen – everything they knew about faith, about illness, about forgiveness, about God’s love shifted in that moment, and there was no going back to the way things were before.

This is one of my favorite stories from the Gospel because there is just so much going on here. This story dares us to wonder about so many things – what was the story of the paralyzed man? How did he come to be paralyzed? Was he born that way or had there been some sort of accident? And what about him elicited such strong determination on the part of his friends? Who had he been to them that they were willing to do what they did for him? Friends? Relatives? What is the relationship between these five people and how was Jesus able to recognize their determination for what it was – a tremendous act of love and faith in search of mercy? And what about the scribes? Jesus had to know they would react as they did and yet he seems surprised by their questioning of him. Or was he just disappointed that they cared

more about orthopraxy, right action, and orthodoxy, right belief, than they cared about being merciful toward this man who had so clearly been suffering?

These questions are what help us to see two of the works of mercy in this story this week. The physical work I'd like us to consider this week is an obvious one – visiting the sick. It's easy to imagine that these four friends had often visited with this paralyzed friend, spending hours with him listening to his worries and fears, soothing his anxious thoughts and helping to ease his moments of discomfort. We can just imagine them sitting around together on one such visit when one of them comes in and says, "Jesus is nearby! Let's take him to be healed!" We know what it is to sit with someone who is ill and desperate for good news and perhaps we are lucky enough to be able to share some with them. But maybe that's not the case and will never be the case. Maybe this friend, this loved one of ours, is facing a situation where hope for healing is more dream than reality. And this is when those visits become so very, very hard. And so very, very important. This is where mercy comes front and center as we find it within ourselves to be with this person no matter the outcome they face. In these moments when we have the opportunity to be with someone, to support someone, to love someone through the darkest and most difficult moments of illness, this is when we become God's mercy made real to this suffering person through

the ministry of presence, just being there in whatever way we are able. Often that is just sitting with them, being with them, holding their pain and fears with them, praying with them. That is truly mercy made tangible, made real, and it is a powerful gift to give and to receive.

So, too is “bearing wrongs patiently” which is the spiritual work of mercy for this week. On the surface, these two things look completely disconnected and it is easy to see circumstances in which that would be the case. Visiting someone who’s sick or turning the other cheek to someone who’s been unkind or even cruel to you could be two entirely different experiences in your life. Or, just maybe, they could be two sides of the same coin. What if the person you need to visit is someone who has been unkind to you in the past? What if the person is being unkind to you still? Why bother to visit? Why care about them at all? If this person has been routinely unmerciful to you in the past, why should you be merciful to them now? What goes around, comes around, after all. You reap what you sow. You get what’s coming to you. That’s only fair. Isn’t it?

Well, the thing is – life isn’t fair. It just isn’t. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. And good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. That’s just the way it is. Sometimes life balances out and sometimes it doesn’t. And mercy – loving kindness beyond

what's required or necessary – is what makes it all bearable. Mercy is what reminds us that what we do does matter, that love is stronger than hate, that caring compassion is always possible, that God never abandons us even though we are sometimes too quick to walk away from God. Mercy is the roadmap God gives us to negotiate all those times in life where we are confounded by circumstances and people we'd just as soon avoid. Confronting mercy is what we do when we'd rather not do anything to respond to an impossible situation we find ourselves in the middle of but we respond anyway because we know it's what God expects of us.

So, as you head out into your week I urge you to ponder where God might be confronting you with the need for mercy – for yourself or for someone else. What if you were the paralyzed man needing to reach Jesus? Who would carry you? What if you were one of the four friends? Who would you be carrying? What if you were one of the scribes? Who are you criticizing, perhaps getting in the way of mercy that's desperately needed? Where is mercy alive in your life? Where is mercy needed in your life and why does it matter? Only you know the answers to these questions. Well, you and God. Take some time and make the effort to talk it over with God this week. It just might make all the difference for you and the people in your life. Amen.