

“What paralyzes us?”
Luke 5:17-28
The Reverend Michael J Magee
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Scene 1 Friends bring a paralyzed man to Jesus

The New Testament is not a book of literalism. By that I mean it is full of metaphors. Jesus tells us his message in parables. Apostle Paul uses body language to describe the church. Even Jesus' actions are enacted parables. Jesus cares for the sick, so he heals them. The resurrection is more than a story of Jesus rising from the dead. It is also a story showing us that no one is beyond the power of God's reconciliation and redemption. Reconciliation is the process of breaking down the walls which divide us.

When I was a child, my next door neighbor's name was Bobby. He had polio before there was a vaccine, and was paralyzed from the waist down. But I never thought of him as a paralytic. I thought of him as my friend Bobby. However, I never met Bobby until my Dad put up a basketball goal in our back yard. He was paralyzed from the waist down, but he could play basketball. We went to see his team win several games in the wheelchair league. But I never met him until my dad put up a basketball goal in our back yard. I guess his shame and bitterness over being paralyzed kept him away. His fear over how I would receive him kept him away. What a rich opportunity that basketball goal was! What a way to break down walls!

I imagine the man in our scripture for today has been paralyzed ever since he fell off his donkey as a child. He is bitter, afraid to stand, and ashamed that he cannot work. Ashamed that he is a beggar. All these emotions at the same time. His friends know Jesus is a healer. His friends want wholeness for their friend. But the crowd surrounding Jesus

is in the way that day. So his friends improvise and lower him through the roof. It is like a scene out of an opera! What a grand appearance, coming out of the ceiling! They get the attention not only of Jesus, but of all the Pharisees and teachers and scribes who come that day to see what Jesus is up to. To see if they could find something for which to criticize Jesus. And they found just what they want. An opportunity lowered from the ceiling. An opportunity that breaks down the ceiling.

Scene 2 Jesus forgives

Everyone in the room is watching the grand entrance. Except the audience of Pharisees, teachers, and scribes. They are not watching the paralyzed man from the ceiling. Because they are not open to a new idea. For they made up their mind before this meeting even began. That only God can forgive. Certainly not a peasant carpenter. Jesus knows they are watching him instead of the man from the ceiling. But he is not paralyzed by his critics. He is always teaching. His lesson today is to show them how to overcome paralysis.

What paralyzes the Pharisees, teachers, and scribes? Physical constraint, or emotion? To be transformed on the outside from paralysis to action, don't they have to be transformed on the inside first? Jesus calls them to repentance. But hold on here. What does repentance mean? Does it mean being ashamed? Is that Good News? No, repentance is misunderstood if it means being ashamed. Repentance as used here means changed. To say repent means change, transform. God transforms into a new creation. Shame is scrubbed away because Jesus says it is not needed. That is the Good News on which the Gospels stand. All is forgiven. Fear? Forgiven. Despair? Forgiven. Bitterness and rage? Forgiven. It is time for the Pharisees to pick up where they left off when shame, fear, and

anger came into their lives, and move on. It is an opportunity for them to pick up their blankets and walk.

I know of a church where some of its members wanted to start a Room in the Inn program for the homeless. This is a program where the members provide a warm place for the homeless to eat and sleep for the night. In objection to the program, someone said: “If we do this the church will stink.” What convinced the congregation to proceed with the program is when someone else said, “If we don’t do it the church will stink.” That remark overcame their paralysis. Because a sense of opportunity overcame their fear. That is what forgiveness is. An opportunity for positive change.

Scene 3 Jesus transforms the paralyzed man’s life

I think what is at stake here is not how paralysis came to the man who came through the ceiling, the Pharisees, or to us. What is at stake is that over the objections of the religious authorities of his day, Jesus forgives and transforms the man in the ceiling from the inside out. And this transformation releases him from the bondage of his paralysis.

You and I also have the God given power to forgive and transform ourselves and others. And in this forgiveness and transformation, we have the power to release ourselves and others from bondage. And we, and they, can then pick up our blankets and walk. Can pick up where we left off and walk.

Once upon a time I had a medical partner. We had a disagreement, and professionally we went our separate ways. We took all our own weekend call, and did not speak to each other much. We wore ourselves out by being on call all the time. How sad. About 3 years ago all this changed. I was sick in the hospital, and was awakened in the

recovery room after general anesthesia. In my post anesthesia dream state, I was worried about who would take care of my patients the next 6 weeks as I recovered from surgery. As if reading my mind, my former partner awakened me in the recovery room by kissing my hand. He said not to worry, he would take care of my patients until I could return to work. Our mutual forgiveness transformed our lives. Our mutual forgiveness overcame our fear, our shame, our bitterness, and our pride. The emotions which before now had paralyzed us. Our mutual forgiveness was an opportunity for positive change.

This is what is at stake. Not how paralysis comes to us, but that Jesus transforms us from the inside out.

Scene 4 Jesus transforms the tax collector's life

Jesus notices a tax collector, not a chief tax collector, but a person who is low in the pecking order. And he calls to him. He says, follow me. He says, come see me in the face of the homeless at the Downtown Presbyterian soup kitchen this Wednesday. He says, come see me in worship next Sunday. He says, come see me in the face of the children when you teach them the Bible next Sunday. He says, come see me in the face of the Mayan Indians in Guatemala this June. He says, see me in the face of the stranger and visitor, and say hello to me.

I wrote a letter last week to Dr Julie Kiser about the violence in Guatemala we have read in the newspapers recently. Julie is an American trained physician who gave up a lucrative career in the safety of the USA to practice medicine among the ignored descendents of the Mayans in Guatemala. She and her daughter moved to Guatemala 7 years ago. She and her medical partner are the only physicians in the entire northern half of Guatemala, in a province called the Peten. Some of you met her. She came to my

ordination here last November, and went to eat lunch with us at Cracker Barrel. She has given the minute for mission during worship here. She and her daughter sat at my Thanksgiving table last November. Before I read you her response, I need to tell you how she feels about guns. She hates guns, and feels very anxious whenever she sees them, no matter who is carrying them, good guy or bad.

Hi Mike and all of you in beautiful Tennessee. I wonder what the springtime is painting on the trees and gardens there.

I read the articles from the Times. Of course it is correct to be worried.

Do not feel that you need to come here to help. Everyone helps in their own way, I think I already let you know that you recently helped me decide what to do for Fidelia (now in the cancer hospital), and I recently received love by snail mail from Becky Smith, which kept me going a whole couple of days.

Sometimes when you ask people who live in Guatemala about the violence here, we get a little testy. It is because you write from a part of the world where people enjoy a level of safety which is very unusual to the majority of humans living in the free world. Your assumption that you should be safe when you travel here is strange to me because I live here, I am not as "Safe" as you are, and you write me to ask me to reassure you that you will be safe. This is not possible.

But it isn't necessary either.

I do not choose to take my children to the Concern project in Columbia because that place is very unsafe compared to Guatemala. I seek the level of safety which I can be comfortable at.

You should do the same. Visit when you can, bring a gun or travel with someone with a gun if you want, or stay home and help from there.

We love you so much. Send news of your family and the churches there in Nashville.

Julie Kiser

Jesus notices the tax collector whose name is Levi. Jesus says to him, "Follow me." Levi has a choice. One choice is to continue what he is doing, paralyzed by fear, anger, or shame. But leaving everything behind, Levi got up and followed him. Levi is Matthew, one of Jesus' first 12 disciples. The one to whom is attributed the first Gospel.

Conclusion

Violence in Guatemala, bad smells, forgiveness in the ICU, and wheelchair basketball. Jesus says, "I love you so much. Pick up your blanket and follow me." Some may see Jesus' call as burdensome. But Levi the tax collector saw the opportunity of a life time. And he never turned back. Jesus says to you, "I love you so much. Pick up your comfortable blanket and follow me."

Glory be to God. Amen.