

“Friends in High Places”
Mark 2:1-12
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Last Wednesday I attended a Soroptomist meeting where a young man presented the program. He works at an organization named, Ability First and told us about his job. Ability First serves people with what we would call disabilities; in fact, it used to be called the Crippled Children’s Society, but the name change implies a change of focus and a reorientation of its mission.

The young man who spoke with us works with children up to the age of 18 in the after school program. He took the job as temporary work. But now he says that he couldn’t imagine leaving this job. His joy and enthusiasm made it clear that he’d found his life’s meaning at Ability First.

He described the children with whom he works, and they are much more than his clients, he is their friend. The children are often unable to clearly communicate. Many are bound to wheelchairs. Some are blind and deaf. As their friend, this young man gets high on any minute progress that his kids make in being able to better function in their world. And he emphasizes their Ability First.

The paralytic man in today’s gospel also had some very good friends. Without them he would have been helpless. Even with them it took extraordinary effort to get him to Jesus for healing. They had to literally dig a hole in the roof and lower their friend down from the ceiling. This extraordinary feat makes this story a favorite of Sunday school children. But it takes some unpacking to understand because the first thing Jesus says to the paralyzed man is “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Only when Jesus’ ability first to forgive sins is questioned, does he say “Stand up, take your mat and go home.”

One might say that Jesus was a holistic healer in an age and time when the worldview was such that sin and health were not considered separate issues and they were not treated as such. Jewish understanding was that the world was broken; but it was broken as a whole, as a web of connectedness, and that healing was the opportunity and possibility for the broken web to be mended, for severed connections to be reconciled.

The main point of sin was not focused on as individual’s “no, no’s” but sin was part of the makeup of a broken world, inhabited by people who had lost their way and ventured away from God. Individual mistakes were only a small part of that

brokenness. So Jesus, being a good Jew, would address the man's whole situation, not just his individual sin. When Jesus says, "son your sins are forgiven," he's talking about the brokenness of the system in which he lived and which held him immobilized and dependent on friends in high places.

It's hard for us to understand this story because we don't think this way. Science has proven that many illnesses are caused by germs. Yet, particularly recently, we've come to understand that people are sometimes healed by a holistic approach. Perhaps a stressful job is the source of their feeling ill or family issues that depress them. To be well their whole lives and the system within which they live needs to be transformed.

Jews believed that God was the only one with the power to forgive and transform people and to change history. God was the only one with the power to intervene and disrupt the powers and principalities of this world so that the captive could be released from whatever trapped them. So what was this Jesus doing being so presumptuous, thinking HE could forgive sin and intervene in this broken world.

In last Wednesday evenings Bible study we discussed Jesus' primary teaching in Mark, which was that the kingdom of God, the reign of God is now, and Jesus was pronouncing it as a present reality. History was being interrupted by the power of God lowering Jesus, so to speak, into creation, incarnation, and Jesus says, "what are you waiting for, repent, turn around and face the awesome power of God."

In the wonderful movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*, the Jewish community awaits the Messiah, almost whines for his coming, and yet, one gets the feeling that the actual event would totally disrupt the social order of their lives and they simply wouldn't know what to do! This was exactly what happened with God in Christ. Jesus announced a new future for a paralyzed man. This was too overwhelming for those people who felt safer anticipating the Messiah's coming rather than receiving it.

Jesus had a friend in a high place who lowered him into humanity, into creation, and brought him face to face with the people and powers of the world, and empowered him with ability first to say what was wrong with the world, but second, to do an intervention.

We all need good friends. Friends can often be the facilitators for our healing. Good friends can tell us the truth, when no one else dares to. Good friends are not fair-weather friends; they are friends with us for the long haul even when they watch us trapped in destructive patterns. They give us confidence when our faith is weak and tell us that a new day will dawn. The paralytic man had friends who climbed upon the roof

and gently lowered him right before the very One who could say the words, “you are no longer bound by the power of a broken world, a world of sin. Take up your mat and go home.”

The way this world is can really make us sick. It is sickening to hear some of the evil in the world. To me, it is more sickening to know that some people do evil because they don't know how or don't feel capable of doing good. Violence and gangs are the only ways they can belong. They think there's no way to have money except by selling drugs or to prostitute themselves. They feel so sick inside that they self-medicate with alcohol or illegal substances. And the systems that they are caught up in do not just affect their world, it effects their whole community.

They are immobilized because they are trapped with no hope and they see nothing beyond the brokenness that surrounds them. They need good friends. They need friends in high places who dare to climb up on the roof and transplant them before the One in whom dwells the power of God, and where they might hear the words, your sins no longer determine your future, you are no longer predestined by your past. Stand up, walk, go home.

We can never underestimate the importance of a community of friends. As parents we are concerned that our children have “good” friends who will model for them good behaviors and who will reinforce the values we feel are important. And we go to great lengths to arrange play dates, and good schools, and extracurricular activities, and youth groups so that our children will have friends to support their learning and growing. Often parents choose churches because they see in it church a place of nurture for their children. Nature provides a child with innate qualities and characteristics; but we also know that nurture within community determines much of that child's future life.

It seems to me that the church can be that field of force in the world, not only for children but for all of us, that like friends in high places. The church can constantly call each other to reach higher and to be more than we ever thought possible. The church can say a resounding “no” to the powers of this world which sometimes say, you can't make it any further in life. The church can say “no” to the idea that you can't overcome your circumstances and that your past has tainted your future beyond repair. The church can say nothing is impossible with God; the powers of this world can't touch you. You are free! You can walk! Take up your mat and go to your home!

That day in Capernaum this unnamed man (we could substitute our name in his place) had friends who climbed to a high place and intervened on his behalf. And then Jesus

responds with his own kind of intervention, and says, "You are forgiven and free, be the man God calls you to be."

Today if we listen carefully, perhaps, we, too, can hear God's intervention in our lives; things don't have to stay the same; novelty abounds, a new future awaits. As the prophet so eloquently said, "Behold, God is doing a new thing, do you yet perceive it?"