

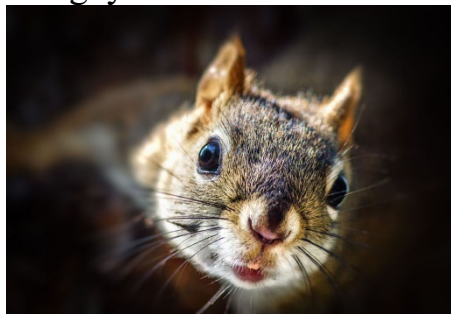
Pick Up Your Mat

Luke 5: 17-26

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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A couple weeks ago, I was working at the dining room table. During quarantine, it's become my Zoom headquarters and my favorite place to write. I can see our live oaks and whatever activity is happening on the street. While I was tapping away on the sermon, I heard another kind of tapping. Really more like scrapping and tearing. What are the neighbors doing? It sounds so loud. Soon, I realized the noise sounded loud because it was our roof where the scrapping and scratching was going on. I went outside. Nothing. I went back to work and the sounds began again. This time I stepped out of the door very quickly and caught this guy:



The squirrel was biting through the soffit to rip a hole into our attic. He looked down on me in triumph and disappeared through his new front door. The war had begun. Breaches in the roof make me anxious. Providing squirrel condos is not part of my calling. It had to be stopped.

So as a homeowner, I really feel for the guy who was hosting Jesus in his house for a public evening of teaching and healing. A crowd had packed the central room of the house and probably filled the courtyard outside as well. Everyone wanted to see the exciting young rabbi from Nazareth. Four men had carried a paralyzed friend on his mat, or stretcher, to the house to ask Jesus for a miracle. But they couldn't get through the crowd. So they went up on the roof and started opening a hole.



You can see that many homes had outside stairs so you could get on the roof. Roofs could be made of thatch, mud and even tiles rolled, laid and baked across wooden beams. Imagine the racket when someone started taking this roof apart. The noise. The debris falling. The dust everywhere. How did Jesus keep his focus? How did the homeowner stand it?



Then, they let down the paralyzed man on the stretcher, through the roof, right in front of Jesus. Yes, just go ahead and throw away your prepared speech. Jesus, of course, seemed unfazed. In fact, he seemed to marvel at the creative, daring faith of the men so desperate to get their friend before Jesus.

I'm sure everyone wondered what Jesus would do. And, as usual, Jesus said something totally unexpected. Looking right at a paralyzed invalid on a mat, Jesus said, "Man, your sins are forgiven." Jesus spoke as if he didn't even see the infirmity. I want to give you what you need most, not what you think you need. Your sins are forgiven. Imagine the response in the friends? Well, Jesus, that's uh, really great, and all, but I think our friend might enjoy this forgiveness a bit more if he could walk, don't you think?

In storytelling, there's a technical term for a trick that makes for a great narrative. It's called *the subversion of expectation*. The story looks like it's going one place, but suddenly it goes in a totally surprise direction. Two weeks ago, we read the story of the miraculous, huge catch of fish. Simon Peter got everything he had ever dreamed of as a fisher. A boat overflowing with fish. But suddenly, he didn't want any of it. He fell on his face in the sinking boat and begged Jesus to leave him, because he was aware of his sinfulness. Then he left the fish and the boats to follow Jesus. For Simon knew his problem was deeper than economic. And his mission greater than fishing. Last week, we saw a man full of leprosy break the law by entering the city to find Jesus. He begged a favor. The obvious request would have been for healing. But instead he asked to be made *clean*: to be restored to community with others and communion with God. His need was deeper than physical.

Today we read how a man who had been unable to walk, or even to rise, got air-dropped right in front of Jesus. His need was glaring. And Jesus said first, "Man, your sins are forgiven!" Let's go to the root of the human problem. Your particular sin may or may not have contributed to your illness. Jesus was not trying to equate specific sin with specific illness, as if anything that befalls you is directly your fault. But disease and death entered God's pristine world through human rebellion. And our deepest need is not robust physical health but restored

fellowship with the God who made us. When you're hurting, this could be a rather disappointing subversion of expectation. Please, Lord, set me free.

It takes a lot of courage to see our deeper needs and so find a deeper joy. I don't know if I could do it. But thankfully, we have witnesses in our congregation who demonstrate this truth. Ronnie Richard was a member of our church for ten years. The whole time I knew him, Ronnie was confined to a wheelchair. This once electric athlete had complications from childhood polio. But I never saw bitterness in him. At his memorial service last week, Ronnie's daughter testified that Ronnie made all the people he knew feel like they're special. He was an encourager. A celebrator of life. He knew his deeper need had been met. Christ Jesus had taken away his sin and given in exchange the blessed Holy Spirit within. That Spirit lit up Ronnie with joy and a delight in life, even from a wheel chair. No victim mentality was allowed.

This past week, we also tragically lost Lindley Spaht Dodson. She was an energetic, beautiful 43 year old wife and mother of three. She had a hilarious, quick wit. She kept her friends for decades. Lindley was also a first rate pediatrician in Austin, Texas. Trained at LSU and Vanderbilt, Lindley was frequently mentioned as a rising star in medicine. Above all, she was deeply committed to Christ Jesus. Lindley got caught, at her own medical offices, in a tragic hostage situation. Her deeper, higher Source kicked in when she forewent a chance to get out, and instead traded herself so three others could go free. Staying safe is not our deepest need. The demands of love run deeper for those who know eternal life in Christ.

Man, your sins are forgiven. Total subversion of expectation. In fact, the learned religious leaders in the audience thought this was outrageous. They knew that Jesus knew the Hebrew Scriptures. The power of forgiveness belongs to God alone. God provided a system of sacrifices and atonement whereby the LORD's people could assure themselves of that forgiveness. But the priests knew they never ever had the power of forgiveness in themselves. They were just representing what the LORD has already prescribed. So what kind of arrogance was it for Jesus to stand in the place of God, seemingly apart from all the prescribed ways of getting made right? Jesus simply declared forgiveness as if he were the Judge himself. Quite rightly, they asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And once again, Jesus' enemies reveal way more of the truth than they mean to. Who can forgive sins but God alone? Exactly. No one. Only God himself. God in the flesh come amongst us.

So, here was this moment when a paralyzed man had been dropped through the roof. Jesus had declared his sins to be forgiven, but had done nothing else. The friends were disappointed. The religious leaders were enraged. Tension hung in the air. Jesus could take the tension. In fact, he toyed with them. “Why do you question in your hearts? Look, which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say ‘Rise and walk’?” That’s a good question. Declaring forgiveness rolls easily off the tongue and no one can tell whether it’s true or not. Though it takes some big confidence to speak for God. But telling a paralyzed man to rise and walk means you have to show some power that people can see. Saying it means nothing if he doesn’t get up. Imagine how all the air had gone out of the room. This young rabbi wasn’t scared of the scholars. And he acted like he could perform a miracle any time he wanted. “So,” he said, “So you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I’m going to back my words with action.” Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.” There. I said it. Now watch. Immediately the man rose up before them, picked up his stretcher bed and got out of there. Glorifying God the whole way. I’m thinking he burned up that stretcher bed that had been such a symbol of his illness.

This story is great drama. But how do we connect to it today? I think there’s a key question for us that arises from this story. It’s this: how does forgiveness free paralysis in life and mission? How does Jesus connecting to us at the point of our deepest need loosen up our whole lives to be lived more fully for Christ? How does faith--robust, risky, sold out faith-- get us connected to the One who alone forgives and brings to life?

These four friends would do anything to get their friend before the healing source. They didn’t let him languish at home. They didn’t leave him to tend to his own life. Their friend’s need *was* their business. Finding Jesus is not a private, individual quest. We need each other. We need to be getting each other before the presence of Jesus. Hungry people need the food of his table. Lost people need the direction of his Word. Isolated people need the community of his church. Exhausted people need the refreshment of praising him. Wounded people need the healing care of those who have already been tended by Christ Jesus. We’ve got to be all up in each other’s business to keep each other before Jesus. We’ve got to reknit the church after a year of disconnection. Calls, texts, visits, rides, prayers, letters, small groups, presence in the House of God.

And I think we’ve got to get over pining, maybe even moaning for how things used to be. We can’t go back either to the old system of what made life seem right, or the old bed of our paralysis. Life is harder for Christians than it used

to be. Life is going to get harder for Christians. People will fall away. We will feel more isolated and more marginalized. But that doesn't change the truth that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh who alone can say to the tainted, battered heart, "Your sins are forgiven." That doesn't change for one second the mission of Christ's people: to join him in seeking and saving the lost. People are going to be mean to us. But that doesn't wipe out the command to love our enemies and meet slander with blessing—even on Facebook.

We have a hidden source. *Your sins are forgiven.* No amount of putting sin on you by those who want to shame you, box you or impose their brand of virtue on you can take away Christ's declaration. You are absolutely free from condemnation by the one person who matters: Jesus himself. We don't need to be paralyzed by cultural conflict. We're working to tell the truth about Jesus no matter what. We're working to love the least and the lost no matter what. We're going to tell the news to everyone who is paralyzed by disappointment, shame, guilt and frustration. Some will proclaim joy from wheelchairs like Ronnie Richard. Some will lay down their lives in love like Lindley. We can't be scared anymore. We can't worry about losing. We have already won everything. Christ died for us so that he could say, "Man, your sins are forgiven." Christ rose for us so he could tell us, "Rise! Take up that old mat and walk. Walk into mission. Walk in love. Walk to the ends of the earth with the gospel of life. You can't lose!"