

“Take Up Your Mat and...”
January 19, 2020 (Youth Sunday)
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Mark 2:1-22

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven. “Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he said to the paralytic— “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old

wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

One: As Pastor Mary Beth mentioned last week, the Gospel according to Mark goes by *really fast*. It's like we hardly even have time to catch our breath at all!

Two: In what has come before today's lesson, Mark has already introduced us to John the Baptist, and told us the story of Jesus' baptism *and* temptation. There were disciples called, demons driven out, healings and miracles, preaching and teaching.

Three: And that was all just in Mark's first chapter!

Four: Today's chapter from Mark goes just as fast as the last one.

Five: It's like a stampede, as Mark quickly leads us from one scene to the next.

Six: In today's passage, we have at least *three* stories lumped together: Jesus healing a paralyzed man, Jesus calling Levi the tax collector as his disciple, and Jesus and his disciples making the Pharisees really angry by not following Jewish law and custom.

Seven: There is a lot we could focus on, but today we'd like to look at the first story that Mark tells here: the healing of the paralyzed man.

SONG: "Amazing Grace" (verse 1)

Eight: Imagine the scene here. Jesus' popularity has grown and grown. By now, he's even bigger than the Beatles!

Nine: In this scene, Jesus' followers find out that he's gone home for the day. There's a lot of them by now, and they all rush to his house (it's like they can't survive five minutes without him), and once they start arriving, they begin pushing and shoving each other, trying to locate their teacher in all the chaos.

Ten: With all of them there, the door to the house becomes completely blocked, so nobody can come in at all.

Eleven: But there are four people, four friends, who have another friend who is paralyzed. And they want in. They really, really want in; but try as they might, they can't get that door open.

SONG: "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" (chorus)

Twelve: After trying – and failing – a few times, the four friends are standing outside scratching their heads when one of them – we’ll call him George – says,
George: “Hey, I’ve got an idea.”

Twelve: He gestures towards the roof, and the other three understand. They look at their friend on the mat and he nods.

Thirteen: Two of them – we’ll call them Frankie and Charlie – Frankie and Charlie find a ladder, and hoist it up against the outside wall of the house. They climb up onto the roof. Luckily, it’s low enough for the other two – George and let’s say, Cameron – for George and Cameron to lift up the mat with their friend on it to meet them. With a heave and a ho, Frankie and Charlie pull up their friend. George and Cameron scurry up the ladder, and soon enough, the five of them are on the roof.

Frankie: “Just as I suspected; it’s made of mud,”

Thirteen: ...Frankie says, examining the roof beneath them (Frankie likes to state the obvious).

George: “Good thing it rained last night,”

Thirteen: ...George chimes in (he’s the one who knows about the weather).

Cameron: “Well, let’s get going, then!”

Thirteen: ...Cameron tells them (Cameron is the bossy, but loveable, one).

Fourteen: The four friends start digging. And digging. And digging. Though the mud is soft, it takes a good half hour for them to dig a hole big enough to get their friend through.

Cameron: “Someone get some rope!”

Fourteen: ...Cameron bosses them, and Charlie (who likes to be helpful) returns in about four minutes with enough rope for the job ahead. The friends tie the rope to the four corners of their friend’s mat.

Cameron: “Ready?”

Mat Man: “Ready!”

Fourteen: And with that, the four friends lower their paralyzed friend, through the hole they’ve made, down into the crowd.

SONG: “Lowering Our Friend” (tune: “Bringing in the Sheaves”)

Fifteen: Now Jesus, who is in the middle of a real doozy of a sermon, stops mid-sentence to watch what is happening. Everyone in the crowd turns, following his gaze. You can hear a pin drop as Jesus and crowd watch this man on his mat being lowered

onto the floor of the house. [pause] When he is safely on the ground, Jesus, who has completely lost his place in his sermon by now, exclaims, in awe,

Jesus: “Son, your sins are forgiven! I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.”

Fifteen: And the man, wobbling a little, stands to his feet; and picking up his mat, walks slowly through the crowd of people, who are gaping at him all the way:

ALL: “We have never seen anything like this!! We have *never* seen anything like this! Never, never, never...!”

Pastor MB: I have a lot of friends who are recovering alcoholics. One of the things they’ve taught me is this: you say that anyone else, besides yourself, is an alcoholic. The only person you can call an alcoholic is you. At first, this seemed kind of weird to me. I mean, it’s often pretty obvious when someone is an alcoholic, especially in the later stages of the disease. If someone is drinking all the time, not able to go to work or take care of kids, not able to function, then they’re probably an alcoholic. But there’s wisdom, I think, in my friends’ insistence that it’s only the individual him or herself who came name him or herself an alcoholic.

...It’s wisdom, I think, because my friends understand something deep about brokenness and sin; which means that they understand something deep about wholeness and healing. Why do they insist on only the individual being able to name herself or himself an alcoholic? I think it’s because they understand that once a person does that for themselves – once someone says, “My name is So-and-So and I am an alcoholic” – then not only does that person start telling the truth about their brokenness, they also start telling the truth about their wholeness.

Sixteen: It sounds like what you’re saying is this: in the same way that your friends don’t get to name what alcoholism looks like for someone else, so they, so we, don’t get to name what *wholeness* looks like for someone else.

Pastor MB: Yep. For a recovering alcoholic or addict, wholeness can look pretty strange. It can look, for example, like showing up at three AA meetings a week for the rest of that person’s life. It can mean saying, on a regular basis, “My name is So-and-So and I am an alcoholic. And after all these years, I still need help.” Wholeness – in this case recovery from a disease like alcoholism – is not always pretty. As some of my friends like to say, recovery often feels like taking three steps forward and two steps back... and sometimes, it’s the other way around.

Seventeen: It sounds like wholeness can be hard. Telling the truth, facing difficult things about yourself, taking three steps forward and two steps back, saying on a regular

basis, “My name is So-and-So and I am broken”... this is not the stuff of movies. It sounds like sometimes, wholeness can be excruciating.

Eighteen: Of course, living a life of recovery from addiction is not the only way to start to become whole. I’ve heard of a man, a professor, who lost his legs to cancer when he was just a teenager. His world was rocked, to say the least. Though he became cancer-free, he was suddenly facing the rest of his life as a double-amputee, a paraplegic. In a lot of ways, he was like the paralyzed man on the mat we meet today... but *before* he was made well. This is what he has to say about it:

Grown-up Man: *I have experienced wholeness, not in terms of ever getting my legs back – that’s never going to happen – but in terms of the changes in society that have happened in the 35 years since I’ve been disabled, [wholeness and healing] with all sorts of things... like accessible bathrooms and restaurants, [and just] being treated better: I don’t experience any shame. ... One of the things we do to create wholeness is to honor people for the way that they are whole. I think that’s God at work.*¹

Nineteen: What I’m hearing is this: Just because someone is not healed in the way we think they should be healed doesn’t mean they aren’t faithful. Just because wholeness may look like two steps forward and three steps back doesn’t mean it’s not happening. Wholeness can be hard, but God is good.

SONG: “Just As I Am” (verse 1)

Twenty: We don’t know what happens to the paralyzed man after Jesus heals him.

Twenty-one: Is he able to run and jump and dance and do all the things that we think should happen when we are whole and healthy?

Twenty-two: Or was his healing slower?

Twenty-three: Did he have to re-learn how to walk?

Twenty-four: Did he have to take literal baby steps for months and months, years and years even?

Twenty-five: Did he never quite dance as well as he did before he was paralyzed?

Twenty-six: Did he still have people look at him sideways, and say, “Weren’t you the guy...?”

Eighteen: I think again of the words from the professor, “One of the things we do to create wholeness is to honor people for the way that they are whole.” Wholeness is hard, but God is good.

ALL: Thanks be to God.

¹ From Podcast NL 206: Jesus Heals and Teaches, Working Preacher website, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/?lectionary=nl>.