

Bringing Others To God (Isaiah 43:18-25; Mark 2:1-12)

While Jesus was making his first trip around Galilee, word kept coming back to his home base of Capernaum about all those he was healing. Thus when Jesus returned to Capernaum, crowds of people were waiting for him. And in the crowd were some people carrying a paralyzed friend or a loved one—we don't know which--on a cot. But they couldn't get their hurting loved one close to Jesus. So, they got really creative. They removed the roof of the home and then gently let down the mat with the paralyzed man on it. They were determined to bring their loved one to Jesus!

And how impressed Jesus was with these stretcher-bearers! It didn't matter the cost—that later they'd have to completely rebuild a roof and ceiling—finding money, materials, and time to do so. They were willing to pay any price to bring the man on the mat to Jesus. They were so sure of Jesus' compassion and power that nothing was going to keep them from bringing their loved one to him. And because of their faith—not the faith of the man on the cot—Jesus helped the paralyzed man on the mat. Jesus looked at the paralyzed man and said, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Were the stretcher bearers surprised that Jesus gave forgiveness instead of physical healing? Surely they'd come seeking physical healing—not sin forgiving! They hadn't asked Jesus to forgive the guy's sins! Were they disappointed? Did they know that the man's paralysis was somehow wrapped up in his being unable to forgive himself or someone else? Did they simply trust that Jesus would know what the man most needed? We don't know the answers to all these questions.

To us, of course, it definitely seems odd that Jesus forgave the man of his sins instead of healing him. But this wouldn't have seemed so odd to the stretcher bearers. For the Jews of Jesus' day believed that if a man was ill, it was because he had committed some sort of sin. They saw illness as a punishment from God. In fact, the rabbis had a saying: "There is no sick man healed of his sickness until all his sins have been forgiven him." So there's a good chance that the stretcher bearers saw the forgiveness of the man's sins as a first step in Jesus' healing of the paralysis. But this thought would have then led them to a shocking realization. For they had been taught to believe that only God could forgive sins. God had told The Prophet Isaiah "I,

I am He who blots out your transgressions...your sins" (Isaiah 43:25).

As John and Susie Stanley have expressed it, "By granting forgiveness, Jesus did what people...thought only God could do. Later church councils, culminating in Chalcedon, spent centuries trying to explain the relationship between God and Jesus. What the councils deliberated for centuries, (the Gospel Writer) Mark accomplished with a simple miracle story"¹--actually, with a double miracle story. But indeed, the story reveals the godliness of Jesus. It manifests Jesus as the one who not only has the compassion to want to help relieve human suffering—but who, as God, also has the power to forgive sins and to give physical healing.

And the story not only shows who Jesus is. Today's story also manifests who we are to be. We're to be modern stretcher bearers! We're to bring others to God, so that he can give them the new life that comes from his compassionate forgiveness and healing. In fact, according to the story, it may be our belief and our creative determination that will do this for those we bring to Jesus. Remember, Jesus healed the paralyzed man not because of faith of the man himself, but rather because of the faith of the group or the community that brought him to Jesus.

All around us, there are people who are paralyzed. Sometimes they're paralyzed by something they did or something that happened to them in the past, something for which they can't forgive themselves or someone else. They're desperate to hear a word of forgiveness. Perhaps you remember that story about a father and son in a little village in Spain who argued, each saying hurtful things to the other. Afterward, the boy, named Paco, ran away to the big city of Madrid. As the months went by, more and more, the father regretted his words. He wanted to apologize to his son, but his son never returned. Finally, the father decided to look for his son. He went to Madrid and posted flyers on every wall and tree. He took out a classified ad in the newspaper. Everywhere his message was the same: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office tomorrow at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father." At noon the next day, the father and son enjoyed a tearful reunion. But guess what? Since Paco is a very common name in Spain, there were 800 other Pacos there. They had all come in hope

¹ John E. Stanley and Susie C. Stanley, "Sermon Ideas for Mark 2:1-12-Part 1"

of hearing a word of forgiveness and healing. The famous psychiatrist Karl Menninger once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day! ☐☐

Others around us are paralyzed by physical suffering or emotional suffering, confusion or despair, paralyzed by so many things. When they are brought to the Lord, they can receive healing, if not a cure.

Catherine Marshall once told about a couple named Mary and Harold. Mary and Harold moved to Chicago many years ago. But since they had no friends in Chicago, they were lonely--and as a result, they became irritable and unhappy with each other. While seeking help from the Bible, they saw these words of Jesus: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit" (John 15:16). Mary and Harold suddenly understood that much of their unhappiness was caused by their self-centeredness. They realized that they were suppose to be living their lives not for themselves but for others. They realized that God wanted them to begin to look around at all those who needed their help. When they began to do this, the first person they saw was the waitress who served them in a nearby restaurant. She apologized for giving them such slow service and said she was new in the city and miserable. They invited her to visit them in their apartment after work. A neighbor who was a widower became the second person they befriended. Soon they were bringing a dozen people to their home every week for conversation and for prayer. And they themselves became happy, knowing that they were bringing so many hurting people to God, who was giving them forgiveness and healing.

We Christians tend to bemoan our empty pews and our shrinking budgets. We wonder what it will take to have church growth. The answer is not in gimmicks or in fundraisers. The answer is in stretcher bearing. What prevents the church from being the church that we are called to be is a lack of stretcher bearing, a lack of bringing lonely, hurting, paralyzed people to God.

Herb Miller, in his book Fishing On the Asphalt, shared that the average

church member has listened to 6,000 sermons, heard 8,000 prayers, sung 20,000 hymns over and over again, and brought zero persons to God.

But the church grew because of stretcher bearers—those who had so much faith in Jesus that they wanted to bring others to him so that these others too could know, be forgiven by, and be healed by Jesus. Because Andrew had faith in Jesus, he brought his brother Simon Peter to Jesus. And after Philip came to know Jesus, he felt compelled to take his friend Nathanael to Jesus.

A survey from The Institute of American Church Growth showed that 75 to 90% of new believers come to Christ through a friend or acquaintance. Only 17% of all conversions come through what is called an "event," such as a pastor preaching a Sunday morning message, a crusade, or a revival.

Let's consider what life would be like for us without the Lord. How different life would be for each one of us. We wouldn't have the peace and joy of knowing that God loves us, forgives us, sustains us, empowers us. We wouldn't have the comfort and encouragement of knowing that he is with us always. We wouldn't have the values and standards that we do for ourselves and our families. We wouldn't have the support, prayers, and encouragement of a church family. Knowing all that being in contact with the Lord means for us, how we not bring others to the Lord for the same forgiveness and healing that we enjoy? After all, as the Apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians 5:20, "...we are ambassadors for Christ...God is making his appeal through us...."

Leslie Weatherhead told about two men in his community who worked in the same shop for many years. Since they left work at the same time, rode the same bus home each evening, and occasionally stopped off at the same tavern on the way home, they became good friends. They shared a lot of things, but they always avoided politics and religion. Then after a brief illness, one man's wife died. He was completely devastated—paralyzed by his despair. His friend came to comfort him and thus finally spoke of his own faith and the strength he personally received from his God, his church, and his faith. The hurting man, however, was angry. He shouted, "In all these years you have never once--never once--invited me to your church nor

spoken of your faith. Now I have nowhere to turn. And you were my friend." How many could say the same to us?!

One of the wonderful Lincoln stories concerns an incident that took place while he was in the White House. Lincoln didn't go to church regularly on Sunday because his presence was disruptive, but he did often attend the Wednesday evening worship service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. He usually sat in the pastor's office with the door open so that he could hear the service. On one such night, Lincoln was accompanied by a White House aide. After the service, when they were walking back to the White House, the aide asked the president how he liked the sermon. Lincoln answered, "I thought it was well-thought through, powerfully delivered and very eloquent." "Oh," responded the aide, "you thought it was a great sermon." "No," Lincoln answered, "it failed. It failed because Dr. Gurley did not ask us to do something great."

Friends, I'm asking you today to do something great--to do what Andrew did for his brother Peter—and what Philip did for his friend Nathanael—and what the stretcher bearers did for their paralyzed loved one. I'm asking you to open your eyes and find those around you who need peace, joy, hope, compassion, forgiveness, healing--blessings that all people want. And then, I'm asking you to bring these persons to the Lord. Invite them to church next Sunday. Invite them to this Tuesday's Sisters' get-together. Invite them to help you on a project at church. Invite them to a Circle ministry. You are called to be and can be the Lord's instrument for giving new life to others.

Corrie ten Boom is quoted as saying: "When I enter the beautiful city, and the saints all around me appear, I hope that someone will tell me, 'It was you who invited me here.'" May it be the same for us. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; February 22, 2009