

“Four Friends”

Mark 1:1-12

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This is one of those sermons that was crafted after the Sunday bulletin was published. A couple of weeks ago, I was drawn to Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, but in the past few days I woke up with the four friends from Mark's Gospel on my mind and in my heart. So, I chose to follow my heart on this one. Though “A Time for Clarity” may be an intriguing sermon title, it will have to wait for another day. I'm calling this sermon “Four Friends.”

I read the story of the four friends who lower the paralyzed man down through the roof about four times! While my mind was trying to wrap itself around the profound theological truth that surely lies within the text, my heart kept getting stuck on the four friends.

Who has such friends? Who here has four such friends who would make such an extraordinary effort to literally pick you up and carry you and cut a hole in the roof and lower you down to the place where healing might begin? Oh, to have such friends! Four of them! Such a blessing! In the story, the four friends are not named but they are not left unidentified. They are identified by their faith. Jesus notices this about them. Their actions reveal they are persons of faith.

To me, these four unnamed friends are a living model of what the church is all about. They have this neighbor who is paralyzed. They are convinced that his life can be fuller and richer and more meaningful if they can find a way to introduce him to Jesus.

They are so convinced of this truth that they let nothing, not even a crowd of people or a thatched roof stand in their way. We aren't told whether they do this against the paralyzed man's will or with his full blessing. We only see that they pick him up and lower him down at Jesus' feet believing this will make a difference. In a way, this is what we do as a church. Believing that being in the presence of Jesus makes a qualitative difference in the meaning of life, we make it possible for people to come inside and see for themselves.

Churches can sometimes be like that house where Jesus was staying. Sometimes churches are difficult to enter for all kinds of reasons. I remember Carol Hanslick, a college friend, once told me her Sunday School teacher had made her cry and she was never going back. I remember Fred Miller telling me he had an argument with the preacher and he wasn't ever going back. I remember Bill Smith being told he wasn't welcome anymore at the communion table in his church because he was divorced and he wasn't going back. I remember Lloyd Case telling how his son's funeral had been in the church and it was no longer a place he cared to be. I remember Bernie's hardware store going into bankruptcy and she was afraid she wouldn't be welcomed in her church anymore by her more successful friends. Churches can be like that house in the story of the four friends, a little challenging to enter.

So, at South Church we have this team of four friends who go around cutting holes into the church roof. This is their mission. They know it is hard for some people to enter through the front door. Who are these four friends? I'd like to think that everyone here would raise his or her hand, claiming to be one of the four. I'd like to think everyone here feels a responsibility for opening a whole in the roof such that someone who is paralyzed, someone who is ostracized, someone who is marginalized can come on in and be in the presence of Jesus.

I'll tell you about this South Church team of four friends. One called the church the other day to reserve a room for women who find themselves at mid-life and needing a new direction for themselves. For some women, this will be their hole in the roof. Another of the four friends called to ask if it weren't time to start an adult mission trip with Habitat for Humanity. Another stopped in to see if maybe it weren't time for an inter-church basketball league to get started. A fourth friend came by to see about opening a door into a Tuesday morning, 7:00 A.M. Lenten prayer breakfast. Do you see how this works?

In the same way that the wall around the old city of Jerusalem has 12 gates, our church has about 12 holes that have been cut to make Jesus more approachable. There is the choir door. There is the nursery school door. There is the Ladies Aid door. There is the prayer shawl door. There is the Kinder care door. There is the Wednesday School door. There is the church school door. There is the wedding door and the funeral door and the baptism door. There is the pastoral counseling door and the Open and Affirming door. At one time or another, several people got up on the roof and opened up several points of entry believing that life and relationships and families are blessed when they find their way into the presence of Jesus.

Mark's story is one of those where there are plenty of characters to identify with. It's not hard to find yourself somewhere in the story. Perhaps you see yourself as the paralyzed one waiting for some support. Perhaps you see yourself as one of the four friends. Perhaps you see yourself as one in the crowd who is pressing in around Jesus, a curious on-looker. Perhaps you are among the scribes waiting for Jesus to say something that will give you cause to reject him.

I find myself fascinated by the four friends. I think these guys are taking a big risk. They are creating a spectacle. They are creating what could be a very embarrassing situation. They could get themselves arrested for property damage! Their friend might never speak to them again. It seems like a risky adventure. But, then again, that's what being church is all about! It's taking a risk in order to participate in the transforming love of God.

On a number of occasions, I have been asked to be part of an intervention to get someone abusing alcohol into a treatment facility. Here's how it can work. The family and the friends and the minister of the person who is in denial about the way alcohol is affecting their life surround this person. Each friend tells the one in the center what they have observed, the change they have noticed, the danger they have perceived. One after another, the friends provide such compelling testimony, that the drinker can no longer deny it. Then, the group literally picks up their friend and lovingly but firmly transports that "paralyzed" one to the hospital. It's called an intervention. It is risky. Somebody's feelings might get hurt. Somebody might end up with a black eye. Somebody might end up with one less friend. But somebody might just end up knowing for the first time that she is loved, believing for the first time that he is of value. That is why it is worth the risk.

I tell you, these four friends are the church. They are the body of Christ. Oh, to have such friends! Do you have four such friends in your life? These are ones who call you on the phone and say, 'We're taking you out to lunch tomorrow. We already made the reservation.' These are the ones who knock on your door about 6:00 p.m. and say, 'We've brought dinner from Bertucci's, and we're staying to eat it with you.' One night, Donna Godbout and three friends picked up their nursing colleague who was suffering with some depression. They had told her they were taking her to a movie. They lied.

They took her to the Billy Joel concert at the Civic Center to hear the kind of music they knew would lift her soul and contribute to her healing.

I know this story Mark tells in his Gospel is subtitled, 'Jesus heals a paralytic.' I know there is something here Mark wants us to understand about who Jesus is. I also know there is something here of profound truth about the four friends. And that is how the text was speaking to me these past few days. I found myself wanting to share this with you all, in the greatest of hope. Amen!