

Mark 2:1-12

True Healing in Forgiveness

Working as a nurse at the University of Utah 2019, Amy Fenton didn't get a lot of time off her feet. So when her employer offered an employee health and wellness program where she could get a free chair massage, she jumped at the opportunity. So in April she scheduled her massage session. She came for some rest and relaxation but she left with something very different. During her session, her masseuse noticed some irregular lumps on her neck and upper back. Within a week she had seen a specialist and within two weeks she was undergoing her first chemo treatment for stage II Hodgkins Lymphoma. She came for one thing and left with something else entirely. She came for rest and relaxation and left with (though certainly not good news) something good, an early diagnosis of an aggressive form of cancer which might have saved her life.

I wonder if the man in the gospel from Mark 2 felt similar. He came to Jesus for one thing and while he did eventually get what he came for, he left with some other wonderful thing entirely.

Now, everything about the first 3 verses of our reading from Mark 2, which set the scene, makes perfect sense. That Jesus' was teaching and that people packed in like sardines to hear him makes perfect sense. Afterall, the last time Jesus had been in Capernaum, maybe a few weeks or a few months earlier, Jesus had preached and the people were left absolutely amazed. We heard about the last week. They were blown away by the powerful way he spoke to them about God's Word. So when the popular preacher returned, it made sense a crowd gathered to hear him teach. That a group of people brought a paralyzed man to Jesus also makes perfect sense. Because the last time he was there, in addition to knocking the people's socks off with his preaching, he also drove out an evil spirit from a man right in the middle of their church service. Then he healed Peter's mother-in-law. And that night the whole town gathered, bringing their sick and demon possessed, and he healed countless others.

But Jesus' teaching and his healing aren't what end up taking center stage in this account. What becomes clear as the story unfolds is that this story is about forgiveness. It's about the importance of forgiveness. It's about the grace of forgiveness. It's about the cost of forgiveness. It's a reminder that true healing comes to us from our loving God as he forgives us our sins and saves us from what afflicts us most deeply.

You know, it was no small feat for those 4 friends to get their 5th, paralyzed friend in front of Jesus. We're told that **Since they could not bring the man to**

Jesus because of the crowd, they dug through the roof above where he was. When they had made an opening, they lowered the stretcher on which the paralyzed man was lying. Now it might not have been quite as labor intensive as digging through a modern day roof, but the effort was considerable. Getting on the roof. Getting that man on the stretcher on the roof. Getting through the thatching and maybe even some hardened clay. These men were committed. More than that. They were faith-filled. They had heard or maybe even seen what Jesus had done. And they believed without a doubt that Jesus could do for their friend, what he had done for others. So no amount of effort was going to be too inconvenient.

But then after all of the work, Jesus doesn't, at first, give the man the thing his friends were seeking for him...physical healing. **When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."**

We're not told if the friends were disappointed with that answer or not. Probably the events happen too quickly for them to dwell much on it. But Jesus is teaching an important truth. When he forgives before he heals, he reminding us that our spiritual need for a right relationship with God is more basic than the need for physical healing or anything else at all.

But the way we often prioritize forgiveness reminds me of joke. 3 survivors are stranded on a desert island. As luck would have it, they find a lamp with a genie in it. Seeing the three survivors, the genie grants them all one wish. "But," says the genie, "I won't help you get off the island." The first survivor steps forward, "I wish for an unlimited supply of water." Granted! Poof! A waterfall and river appear. The second survivor steps forward. "I wish for an unlimited supply of food." Granted! Poof! Fruit trees and animals appear. The third survivor steps forward. "I wish for a car door." "A what?" says the genie. "What do you want that for?" "Isn't it obvious? So I can roll down the windows when it gets hot out."

Now, you can insert any particular type of person you want to poke fun at for that third, less-than-intelligent survivor. But in the idiocy of the punch line there's a spiritual truth. How often don't we prioritize the least valuable kind of needs in our lives? Physical and mental well-being. Those are good and godly needs. The ability to provide for family and self. Those are good and godly needs. But how often don't we not just prioritize them, but do so at the expense of relationship with Christ and even convince ourselves those will be ALL we need to be happy and well off. We can spend hours in prayer lamenting our problems and asking God to fix them...but forget to search sin sick souls and rejoice in his forgiveness. We can convince ourselves that spending more and more time in work will lead to a better and better life even if it means we have to sacrifice the time for God to speak to us in worship or devotion. We make sure

we have time to relax and wash away the physical and emotional stress of the days but we turn getting rest for our souls by spending time with our God in his Word into some hellish chore. And even if those needs ARE met, they are little more than car doors on a desert island, bringing a cool breeze of little value.

In this poignant moment, Jesus calls us to rethink our priorities. What that man who could not move needed more than anything, was forgiveness. There was no more important or basic need.

And what we are also reminded of as Jesus gave that man what he needed most, is the grace of forgiveness. Jesus saw into their hearts and into that man's. And even though he never said a word, we saw the inner state of his heart. There was nothing on that man's part that would scream out to us or any other normal human that this was a man deserving of forgiveness. Yet, Jesus responded to the inarticulate longings of the man's heart, showing that you don't have to have it all together in order to merit God's forgiveness. All you need is need. All you need is nothing.

I've felt before, and so I'm sure you have too, that at times I'm not fit to be forgiven. Another failed attempt to resist temptation or probably more accurately another failed opportunity to resist at all. The same sin rising up in the heart over and over. How could God feel anything but disgust for me? I've been in those moments and felt like it wouldn't be right for me to hear the gospel. As if I hadn't spent enough time feeling badly about it. As if it was too easy a solution. As if...in other words...God was not a God of grace.

Jesus reminds us with his actions that his forgiveness comes by grace...by his undeserved love. If I deserved it... if it were dependent on me being sorry enough... or feeling badly enough for the proper amount of time... or at least avoiding the "really bad" sins. Then that wouldn't be grace. That would be earned.

Jesus' forgiveness comes by grace. You need nothing but the need...which we all have. And he gives freely and fully.

But not without cost. Which brings us to our final point about forgiveness. The experts in the law didn't take too kindly to Jesus' gracious pronouncement. What gave him the right? Only God can forgive. Who does Jesus think he is? This is blasphemy! He's claiming to be God! That's what went through their heads, mind you. They never said. The very fact Jesus directly addressed the thoughts of their mind should have been reason enough to silence their objections. But Jesus wasn't going to let them off so easily. Instead he posed a question. **Which is easier: to tell the paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your stretcher, and walk'?** In typical Jesus

fashion, no challenge he's given prove too much nor does his responses ever fail to make you think.

So what's the right answer? Well, on the surface I think the answer is, "your sins are forgiven". He didn't ask which is easier to do, but which is easier to say. One can say "you're sins are forgiven" and while only God can actually forgive, just as they were accusing Jesus of, someone can SAY that even if they can't do it. But if you tell a paralyzed man to get up and walk, well, you're hypocrisy will be immediately exposed if you can't follow through. That's why after asking the question Jesus said, **so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your stretcher, and go home."**

He did the supposedly "harder" thing and there was no hypocrisy to be exposed. **At once the man got up, picked up the stretcher, and went out in front of everyone.** Proving that Jesus had the authority to forgive because the question has more than one layer. In the end, the experts were right about one thing. Only God can forgive. And only God can heal as Jesus did. Both require divine power. To do the one is to have the power to do the other.

But you and I are also aware of a final layer to that question that reveals the deep cost of doing what Jesus did there that day. Ultimately his enigmatic question puts us into the shadow of the cross. Because while it may SEEM harder to heal physically than to forgive, in the end it would require Jesus' death to secure the forgiveness he so freely granted that paralyzed man. It takes only great power to heal a man physically, but it would require infinite suffering, death, and astonishing love for Jesus to be able to forgive us.

And that's exactly what he did. The forgiveness we so desperately need...more than food or health or breath itself. The forgiveness he so freely gives... cost him everything. He willingly suffered for you and died for you, because he loves you.

And so he proclaims to you, son...daughter...your sins are forgiven. That's true healing. Healed of the only disease that can really, finally kill us. Taken away by him so that you can stand right in your relationship with God...so you can call him Father. So you can be confident your eternal life and eternal future are secure in him.

That formerly paralyzed man left walking on his newly healed legs rejoicing and praising God. The people glorified God have seen this amazing feat. As we leave our sanctuary today on the legs God has given us, may we too do so rejoicing in the true healing Jesus has given us through his forgiveness. Amen.