

Luke 5:17-26
An Unexpected Turn of Events
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I don't know if you saw a video that went viral this week. It was from an episode of Jeopardy this week in which one of the categories was "talkin' Football." And for what may be the very first time in the history of Jeopardy all five clues went without a response. Not only that, but not once did any of the contestants even ring their buzzer. The reason I mention this is for those of you who couldn't care less about what happens this afternoon, you are not alone.

And if you would prefer to think of the event to take place after worship as an expression of culinary acumen—you are welcome to do that as well.

In Seminary, when we were in preaching class one of the things they taught us never to do was don't give away the goods too early, because if you do people might check out. But I know that's not the case for this group of attentive listeners. So, at the risk of giving away the goods too soon I want to tell you the whole point of this message right up front. The very best thing for us in this life is to be in the presence of Jesus.

We're a month into an in-depth journey through the Gospel of Luke. Throughout the Gospels time after time we're invited to hear these accounts and see them not as isolated incidents 2000 years ago, but as a living Word inviting us into the presence of Jesus here and now.

On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.^[a] ¹⁸ And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. ²⁰ And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." ²¹ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ²² When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?' ²⁴ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." ²⁵ And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. ²⁶ And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today."

Everybody is a somebody who needs to be in the presence of Jesus. You see we are, all of us, people with infirmities of one sort or another. And if you are thinking to yourself, I don't know what you're talking about, my life is pretty wonderful, go ahead and turn to your neighbor and ask them what's wrong with you, I'm sure they'll be glad to tell you.

I would like to look at this scene briefly from three different perspectives: the man on the mat, his friends, and the crowd.

First the Friends:

When we pick up Luke's gospel today Jesus is teaching in a crowded house. Word has gotten around that Jesus is doing wondrous things, so as is the case when exciting things begin to happen—a crowd gathers. The house was packed with all sorts, including and especially Pharisees.

Four men hear the news and decide to carry their paralytic friend to the place where Jesus was. And the text says, when Jesus saw their faith. Nothing is said of the man on the bed. Presumably he's not going against his wishes. He's ok with this, but it is the faith of his friends that moves Jesus.

Do you have four friends? Do you have even one or two friends who know you and care about you this well? There is an epidemic of isolation and loneliness in our day (especially among men) we have relationship deficiency. Not just in someone to hang out with and watch the super bowl and drink cokes with, but friends who will reach out, hold you accountable, press you to become a better dad, husband, a friend who will intercede for you.

This text is an example of how we're called to intercede for one another and the spiritual healing that comes from our intercessions before God for one another.

I want to tell you the story of two people from my first congregation. Brett and Marie. Marie had a history of drug use that caused her to have her children taken away from her. They came to me because they had met one another and had fallen in love and wanted, not only to be together, but to make their faith a center of their lives.

Marie often spoke of how agonizing it was to only have supervised visits with her children. Her son Jackson was living with grandparents because child protective services placed him there while she was using. When we met she was about 5 months clean. She wanted nothing more than to get her son back. Brett and Marie came because they wanted to get married and begin a new life together. I had no power over her ability to see or regain custody of Jackson, but we could come to Jesus together.

Through that church they experienced unconditional love and acceptance, but also the forgiveness that the experiences of their past were not determiners of their future. Last week I had the chance to travel back to Allendale for a funeral of a dear friend and saw Brett and Marie. Brett has become an elder in the church, his excavating business is booming, Marie has been given back the custody of her son and he is flourishing, she is also running the sound board and video system at the church. But most of all they received and are living into the life of Christ who forgives our sins and helps us to see life rightly. It happened because one carried the other when she was not able on her own, into the presence of Jesus.

Second the paralyzed man:

Imagine with me the crowded room, Jesus is there holding court with the Pharisees and religious teachers. When all of a sudden a little ray of light pierces through, hmm, that wasn't there before. Then a little dust starts to fall, as tiles are removed. Now there's a bigger hole, and what's this, four ropes suspending a mat carrying a man drops down out of the ceiling. It has an almost slapstick element to it

Now there in front of Jesus, surrounded by a room full of religious leaders, academics, and social elites, was a man paralyzed lying before Jesus. I can imagine Jesus looking up with amazement through the dust and the light to see the 4 men who had just done this for their friend. And the text says: when Jesus saw their faith, he said, “My man, your sins are forgiven you.”

Men on the Roof: Wait, what did he just say, what’s he talking about? Sins? It’s his legs Jesus. His legs...he can’t walk, that’s why we brought him.

Even though at first glance it doesn’t seem like his sins are the issue, but when we come to Jesus we don’t always have the right need in mind. Let me say that again: when we come to Jesus we don’t always have the right need in mind.

What this man must have thought was that the very best thing that could happen to him that day would be for him to be given the use of his legs back. Like so many, what he may have thought was: “if I could just walk, then I’d be happy.” If I could just get the right job, or the right spouse, Jesus if you could just help me with this investment, or this project, then I would be content, then Jesus, we can talk. Nope, Jesus doesn’t play that cruel joke on us, as he didn’t for the man on the mat.

There was a New York journalist who observed the many men and women she’d come to know who were waiting tables and living in Manhattan hoping to get their big break in show business. They were like so many other people: stressed, driven, easily upset. But when they finally got the fame they’d long sought after, they became insufferable: unstable, angry, and manic. They were actually unhappier than they used to be.

Getting the very thing they wanted they found that nothing changed. They were still them, nothing changed. She closes with a quote that is utterly haunting: “I think when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you, he grants you your deepest wish.”

When Jesus looks into this man’s eyes and says, “My man, your sins are forgiven” he gives him an even greater gift than we can imagine. He gives him the gift of being able to see his life rightly. It was the best day in the world for him. But it also meant the worst for Jesus, because in forgiving his sin, Jesus was also taking that guilt and shame into his person and bearing it all the way to the cross, and dying so that this paralytic could know who he is and how truly loved he was.

Lastly the Crowd:

The very last line of this text teaches us something about the crowd. Our translation says when the crowd saw these things **amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen extraordinary things today.”** I like how the New RSV puts it: We have seen strange things today.

Jesus knew that it was not just the man who was being healed and instructed that day. This pivotal moment was important for the crowds too. The reason there were so many there that day was word had gone out that Jesus was healing and performing miracles. And people are always drawn to the miraculous. When signs and wonders take place, there’s always a crowd that gathers.

Let me preface this by saying I believe in the miracles, I believe they are meant to point us to this amazing in-breaking of God’s presence among us in Jesus Christ. But belief in the miracles and looking for the miracles is not the same as Christian faith. Jesus knew that what these people

needed was not another miracle, they needed a heart change. The problem with miracles is that we have short memories, and tomorrow we'll just want a bigger one. Belief in the miracles is not the same as Christian faith.

Karl Barth has a wonderful definition of faith, he writes in a short little book called Dogmatics in Outline (his explication of the Apostles' Creed): "Christian faith is the gift of the encounter in which men and women become free to hear the word of grace which God has spoken in Jesus Christ in such a way that in spite of all that contradicts it I hold fast to Christ."

Jesus is inviting us to see our deepest need in light of his true purposes for our lives, and then to trust him in spite of all of the things that would seemingly contradict faith. The friends heard about the great things Jesus was doing and came, the paralytic heard and was willing to have his deeper need healed, the crowd heard and encountered something bigger than a miraculous healing, they saw the living God in the presence. And the text says, all were amazed.

And with a glint and a wink of the eye, Jesus looks at them and says so that you will know it's me, take up your bed and walk.

Father we thank you for those times in our lives when we are able realize the deeper needs of our lives and have them cared for by you. We pray for those who may be here because there is a void in their lives, address that need in just the way you know how, Lord. For those who are here because they need to see something miraculous the revive their faith, we pray that you would come to them in the power and consistency and peace that only you can offer by your Spirit. Give us faith that in spite of all that contradicts it, enables us to hold fast to Christ. Amen.