

Seventh Sunday After The Epiphany

Year B

February 19, 2006

Mark 2 : 1-12

For the people of St. Philip's

Maria Hoecker, preacher

*"...We've never seen anything like this."*

Well, the word is out: Jesus is back! He who had set out on the road to Galilee, calling those who would follow him, (1:35) has returned to his home in Capernaum. It doesn't take long for the house where Jesus is staying to be absolutely packed with people. In the midst of the crowd, some scribes, the esteemed elders of the community, have probably found prime places inside to sit. Others have to squeeze into whatever tiny space they can find. Some are probably providing hospitality to the crowds, kids are underfoot, all wait to hear what Jesus has to say. All gathered are probably hungry in one way or another. They want to hear some good news. There are folks in the doorways and standing on tiptoe, peering through the windows, curious to hear what their neighbor, this traveler, has to say.

But there are some who can't get in.

So here come four friends carrying a paralyzed man to the home of Jesus. Perhaps they've heard of Jesus' gift for healing. They have faith that Jesus can help this man, their friend. But they can't get close enough to catch Jesus' attention. That crowd is blocking the door. The paralyzed man has no access to the healer, Jesus.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, crowds are often gathered around Jesus. But while they might be eager to be entertained by his miracles, generally they don't end up becoming disciples. The crowds in Mark always seem to be just a wee bit fickle. Oh, they enthusiastically seek to be close to Jesus, but we know at the end of this journey, the crowds will call out "*Crucify Him.*" Jesus senses the growing danger of these fickle crowds. I *always* take delight in the fact that Jesus spends a fair amount of his ministry seeking to be away from the crowds. When he does speak to them he speaks in riddles-parable- stories that confound the casual listener. Jesus often seeks to go inside of houses or to private places, away from crowds. He seeks to connect with those who desire to go deeper into the mystery of God's all inclusive love for all.

So what is the faith that Jesus saw in the *friends* of the paralyzed man? Let's imagine we're in that house. Imagine if you will that we have a paralyzed man who wants to join us right up here and that person can't get in. Of course we don't notice that someone is struggling to get in, that all happens unbeknownst to us. But suddenly we do notice thumping around above us. Gradually, much to our dismay, a big hole opens up in the chapel area. A shaft of light streams in, a cloud of choking dust and debris fills the air as it falls to the floor, and a man is lowered down right here in front of us on a pallet. Four persons of faith have carried a paralyzed man up a ladder, chopped a hole through the roof of our recently renovated church, and brought one who cannot walk to Jesus to be healed.

Can't you just here the owners of the home in the time of Jesus? Surely they must have been horrified to see this new hole in their roof, handicap accessibility taken to the extreme. Good thing no one is proposing that around here! A simple ramp to the door will do.

But Jesus saw something profound, something much more penetrating than a gaping hole in the roof of a building. The building itself has long disappeared. It's long gone, fallen into a heap of rubble. What has endured? It was the empowering faith of a few friends. These four friends knew that in order to walk again, the paralyzed man needed to be close to Jesus. This man needed to be near the action. But Jesus also needed for these men to act. Without them, the paralyzed man could not be brought to Jesus for healing. And without the faith of these compassionate friends, ultimately Jesus' enemies would not be forced to recognize his authority from God to forgive sin.

Today as always, at this Sunday Holy Eucharist, we come together for prayers and forgiveness. On Wednesdays in the intimate space of our chapel, we who are able, climb three steps to gather for a Eucharist and prayers for healing. On

those days, if we are able, we come forward, seeking to be anointed with oil and receive the sacraments. Any time we gather at God's Table, each of us chooses either to come forward to receive, or to pray for the people, we open our hearts to God's grace to heal our pain and grant us the joy of freedom that comes from God's ready forgiveness.

For all of us who move forward in prayer and action, there's always a nagging fear. What if those for whom we pray *aren't* healed, could that mean we just didn't have "enough faith" or "the right kind of faith"? No, we are freed from that fear. That's the Good News that Jesus has promised us. Our faith opens a door for God's healing power. It blows the roof off of our own limitations. Faith in a forgiving God is what opened up the roof for the paralyzed man. But it was not just the faith of the paralyzed man that brought him to Jesus. No. It was the faith of his friends. It was his friends who were willing to physically remove ALL obstacles that separated the paralyzed man from the Body of Christ.

That's all any of us can do, really. We are called to open a portal for God's healing through Jesus Christ. This occurs on all levels, this access to the healing touch of Jesus Christ. As members of the Body of Christ, it is up to us to transform physical barriers that restrict access to our common prayers and worship. Just doing it half way isn't enough. All parts of our space and liturgies must be accessible to the paralyzed. Do we have to open a hole in the roof? No, thanks be to God. All we need is access to the chapel so that choir members, clergy, sacristans, acolytes, and those who wish to attend our chapel services are not blocked at the door by three stone steps. We the faithful friends who seek to open a pathway are also healed. Everyone thrives when all have access to the healing power of Jesus through their active participation in the life of our Church.

What the keepers of the House, the scribes who were sitting close, could not see about Jesus, was something the four friends on the roof could see. Something unique occurred that had never happened before. The crowds knew it. "We never saw anything like this." Right there in Capernaum, God granted the right and power to forgive sins to Jesus. Jesus challenged the crowd to recognize not only his God-given power over disease, but also his authority to do the divine work of forgiving sins. To prove it Jesus' tells the paralyzed man, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk."

Jesus' followers later insisted that he communicated this same authority on to them. The pardon that Jesus bestowed on the paralyzed man was one of the first signs of a new era in the relationship between God and humanity. God's act of reconciliation in Christ established a reconciled community- the church

As a member of the Body of Christ, my sins affect everyone around me. My sins sap the vitality of the church, weaken the integrity of our community, and scandalizes outsiders. But by the grace of God, my sins are forgiven. I am carried to Jesus by all of you who surround me today. Each of us are carried to this place by our friends in Christ. As friends we are called to remove barriers that obstruct free access for all to Christ's Table. We can be the faithful friends who willingly cut holes into the seemingly permanent structures of our church. In doing so we faithfully bring ourselves, and our paralyzed neighbors, to the Table of Jesus Christ.

We bring ourselves and our friends into the loving embrace of Christ's healing power.