

“...With a little help from my friends”

Cynthia Lapp
February 19, 2006

Mark 2:1-12

Psalms 41

This week we celebrated a great festival of friendship. You missed it? It was Valentine's Day. For years I refused to participate in Valentine's Day because I thought of it as one more commercial holiday that encouraged consumerism. I changed my mind somewhat when I worked at WATER, Women's Alliance... The women there actually celebrated Valentine's Day, in a big way. A rose was placed on each person's desk, as well as a box of chocolates. There were special cookies for tea time. And of course there were cards expressing love for shared friendship. It actually became a day I looked forward to. In my new idealism, Valentine's Day became a day when I could surprise my friends with cards, flowers and candy. I could surprise people who were not expecting it, people who might otherwise get overlooked in the lovers hullabaloo. Ideally.

This year for Valentine's Day we had a candlelight dinner at our house. With 4 adults and 5 children it was not a quiet, romantic dinner but it was an occasion to celebrate our friendship with another family. And an excuse to have strawberries and chocolate.

The gospel this morning tells the story of a man who had extraordinary friends.

According to Mark, Jesus has made his home in Capernaum. After traveling throughout the Galilean countryside, preaching, teaching and healing, he has returned home. Finally a little down time. During his travels he had been so surrounded by crowds in the towns that sometimes he had to go to the “country,” just to get away from people. Now he is home again but even here rest is elusive.

People begin coming to the house and soon it is so full that there is no room for anyone else. Jesus teaches the people, “speaking the word.” News of Jesus' ministry is obviously spreading. All kinds of people come, people genuinely interested in hearing what this healer has to say, to check out if he is for real. The religious authorities, the scribes, come not so much to be taught as to prevent teaching. Being an intuitive, Jesus senses their suspicion from the beginning but he carries on anyway.

While Jesus is teaching, four people come carrying a fifth on a pallet or some kind of little mattress. They are friends of the man who lays on the mat unable to move. But even their love for him does not give them the strength to push through the dense crowd into the house. So they do what committed friends do; tear off the roof and lower him down into the house.

I imagine we would be more than a bit troubled at this turn of events but Jesus sees it as an act of faith. The four friends clearly have heard about Jesus and they are determined that their friend see him. The writer of Mark tells us that it is the faith of these four friends that spurs Jesus to say to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven.” The man and his friends are not asking for forgiveness. Nothing is said about repenting though perhaps just the fact that he couldn't walk was evidence enough, at that time in history, that he was sinful.

The scribes, ready to pounce on anything that Jesus might do wrong, begin thinking to themselves: “Who is this man to forgive sins? There has been no sacrifice that entitles this man to be forgiven. There are procedures to go through to be forgiven, sacrifices and penance to be paid. Who is this Jesus to turn the system around and forgive sins before forgiveness is asked for?”

Jesus knows that the scribes are troubled and offended even though this criticism occurs only in their heads and hearts. He turns to them and says, "These friends brought him for healing, didn't they? Isn't it easier to forgive sin than to make him walk? But okay I will heal him too." And with the command to get up and walk the fifth friend stands up and walks away. And everyone gathered is amazed and glorifies God, even the scribes.

As I read this familiar story, I am drawn to these four silent friends and their courage in bringing their friend to Jesus. Let's call the man Matthew. Matthew's friends must have been loyal friends, to carry him across town and then do what it took to get him close to Jesus.

The details of the situation are not clear. We don't know if Matthew had been paralyzed for most of his life or if this was a more recent phenomenon. We don't know how long his friends have been carrying him around from healer to healer. Perhaps it was more out of desperation than faith that they came to Jesus. If Matthew had been living without mobility for a number of years he may have begun to feel alone like the Psalmist in

Psalm 41.

⁴ "O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you."

⁵ My enemies wonder in malice when I will die, and my name perish.

⁶ And when they come to see me, they utter empty words, while their hearts gather mischief; when they go out, they tell it abroad.

⁷ All who hate me whisper together about me; they imagine the worst for me.

⁸ They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me, that I will not rise again from where I lie.

⁹ Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.

¹⁰ But you, O LORD, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them.

In these words of the Psalmist there is some bitterness. He doesn't speak of friends, he speaks of enemies. He feels betrayed. But he has not lost faith, and he continues to cry out to God. These words of the Psalmist, our Matthew, are harsh if they are directed to the faithful friends. By the end of the Psalm there is praise for what God has done and what God will do.

¹¹ By this I know that you are pleased with me; because my enemy has not triumphed over me.

¹² But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever.

¹³ Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.

We are the friends and we are Matthew. We know the helpless feeling of watching a good friend struggle. Sometimes we feel paralyzed, unable to move out of an unhealthy situation. It might be an abusive relationship, an addiction, an untenable work situation, long-term illness, a disability... There are many ways in which we struggle, in which we watch our friends struggle. It is then that we must depend on our friends to carry us, to pray for us, to pray *instead* of us. How can we carry

each other to Jesus? What might that look like in this day when the healer is not next door in Capernaum?

How can we, as followers of Jesus, be part of the healing that Jesus granted? Jesus' first action was to forgive Matthew's sins. Forgiveness is not just a political act here to impress and confuse the scribes. It is the beginning of the healing process. Forgiveness is the spiritual healing that Jesus offers. But why do we need to be forgiven? Why can't we just be healed? Because in our unhealthy state we can be alienated from God, from Love itself. And that can lead to alienation from ourselves and from each other. Remember the words of the Psalmist? He doesn't trust anyone. He thinks that others wish the worst for him. This alienation can be a spiritual paralysis. When we offer forgiveness to each other, opening our arms to hold and to be held our spirits are freed

It wasn't just one friend that carried Matthew to Jesus. There were four friends to carry him. This is a project that we plan together, that we carry out with others. To be reconciled to God, to ourselves, to the community, this is the forgiveness that Jesus offers, that we offer to each other in the Body of Christ.

What of the times when there is no cure for the body, does that mean there has been no forgiveness? That there has been no healing? If we turn back to the verses from Mark we see that the healed Matthew was not the only one affected by the healing event. The whole crowd was amazed and praised God for the healing. When we dare to share our pain in community, we also have a community that rejoices with us. When our friends bring us before Jesus, there is a crowd waiting with us, willing to carry us when we can go no further. We are carried to the Body of Christ.

Nate Hajdu works at Jubilee Association, a ministry begun by this congregation, for adults with developmental disabilities. One of the men Nate works with is Charlie. In the years that Nate has cared for Charlie, and literally carried him, Charlie has not been healed of his disabilities. Through Jubilee, there are many "friends" that join together to carry Charlie and hope is seen where it may not have seemed possible. Joining hands to carry each other, we see Jesus. We are the Body of Christ.

I invite Nate to read a poem he wrote about his friendship with Charlie.

My Friend Charlie

He is my friend: I am his friend
I help him out: He helps me to learn
I help him to learn: He helps me to grow
I help him to grow: He teaches me to accept

His struggle: Is my struggle
His vulnerability: Leads to my respect
My respect: Leads him to trust
His trust: Leads to my devotion

His availability: Feeds my desire to be needed
I keep his secrets: He keeps mine
We have an arrangement
His lack of self-consciousness: Leads to my tolerance
His constant need for stimulation: Leads to my patience

His discomfort: Sharpens my sensitivity
His unhappiness: Is my challenge
His presence: Eases my isolation
His loyalty: Leads to my loyalty
Which leads to mutual appreciation
His brokenness: Makes me accept my own brokenness
Which leads to healing

His humanity: Leads to personal connection
His steadfastness: Centers me
His smile: Is my reward
His joy: Lifts my spirits
His happiness: Gives me a sense of purpose
His struggles: Expose my anxieties
Which tests me
Then strengthens me
And in turn bolsters my faith

In guiding, I am guided
In helping, I am helped
In teaching, I am taught

In his laughter, there is joy
In that joy, there is energy
In that energy, there is spirit
In that spirit, there is grace

In his eyes, there is a glow
In that glow, is his soul
In his soul, there is God
And in God, there is peace - Nate Hajdu

Mark 2:1-12

²When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷"Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? ¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the paralytic— ¹¹"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." ¹²And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Psalms 41

¹Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble.
²The LORD protects them and keeps them alive; they are called happy in the land. You do not give them up to the will of their enemies.
³The LORD sustains them on their sickbed; in their illness you heal all their infirmities.
⁴As for me, I said, "O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you."
⁵My enemies wonder in malice when I will die, and my name perish.
⁶And when they come to see me, they utter empty words, while their hearts gather mischief; when they go out, they tell it abroad.
⁷All who hate me whisper together about me; they imagine the worst for me.
⁸They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me, that I will not rise again from where I lie.
⁹Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.
¹⁰But you, O LORD, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them.
¹¹By this I know that you are pleased with me; because my enemy has not triumphed over me.
¹²But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever.
¹³Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.