

Mat Carriers

“...and after having dug through the roof,
they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.”

Mark 2:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Over the years, I have found that one of the best ways to make biblical stories more interesting, meaningful and personal is to not jump too quickly to what might seem to be the main point of the passage. One of the most effective ways do this is to **put yourself in the shoes of the different characters to see how the story might unfold from their perspective.**

In other words, **there is a different lesson that can be learned when approached from the perspective of each character.** What usually happens is that at any given moment in our own personal journey of faith we seem to gravitate toward and relate more with one particular character or perspective over another. Therefore, the next time you read that particular biblical story, perhaps years later, you may identify more with a different character or perspective.

Let's take today's story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man as an example, for there are several interesting, informative, and different perspectives. The cast of characters in any given story is often larger than we realize. The cast in this story includes:

- the large **crowd** that gathered around Jesus to hear him teach;
- the **four friends** who carried their paralyzed friend on a mat, then who rip an opening in the roof of the house in order to lower the man down to Jesus;
- there's the **paralyzed man** himself, who's sins are forgiven, and who's body is healed so that he was able to stand up and walk home;
- there is **Jesus**, of course, who after being interrupted by human need brings healing and wholeness to the paralyzed man, both in terms of spiritual healing – in the forgiveness of his sins, and of physical healing;
- and there are the **scribes**, who accuse Jesus of blasphemy for making claims of forgiveness that only God can make. For the scribes, the entire incident is one of who has the proper authority to say and do certain things. Jesus, in their estimation, was outside the limits of proper authority.

At some level, there is probably a bit of each and every character in all of us that we can relate to. On this particular day, perhaps you relate most to the **crowd** – those who gather in the presence of the Divine with much interest and great anticipation to learn and grow. Hopefully that is something that each of us do every time we come to worship God.

Or perhaps it's the **group of friends** you connect with, the mat carriers, doing whatever it takes to help another who is in need. Imagine a group of folks unroofing our sanctuary to get our attention.

Many of you may relate to the **paralyzed man** by recognizing things in your life, whether they be physical, emotional or spiritual, that are holding you back from experiencing wholeness and living life to the fullest.

Since we are all called to carry on the ministry of Jesus, it is not uncommon to relate to **Jesus** himself. In Jesus, we recognize our calling to offer forgiveness, wholeness and possibilities for new life to others.

And yes, there are times when we are like the **scribes**, questioning the authority that others claim to have – especially those whom we believe have no right to be in positions of authority, or for those whose authority we no longer respect.

I mention all these possibilities of relating to different characters because I believe that **any biblical text has many different points to make**. When I prepare a sermon I usually try focus on just one particular element, angle or theological point. I have long used as a guideline the notion that when crafting a sermon, **I would rather try to make one point well, than make many points with mediocrity**.

That does a couple of things. First, it usually makes my sermons a bit shorter than the average, which I have found many people deeply appreciate. Not only that, I've also learned that most folks, including myself, are better able to remember one point that is made well, than umpteen points, or even the more typical "3-point" sermon that is traditionally taught in seminary.

I take time to mention all of this today primarily to highlight the fact that there exists the potential for many, many sermons and lessons within any biblical text.

That being said, when I read this particular biblical story this past week, it wasn't Jesus and the issues of healing and forgiveness, nor the life struggles of the paralyzed man, nor the devotion of the crowd, nor the scribes with authority issues that caught my attention and imagination.

Instead, when I thought about this congregation it was the actions of the friends of the paralyzed man that I connected with most. **What moved me was what this story has to say about being a compassionate friend to someone in need; or, to use the imagery from the story itself, being a mat carrier.**

Each carrying a corner of the mat that their paralyzed friend lay on, the four friends found that they could not get inside the house to see Jesus because the crowd was so large. Not letting that stop them, they took the extraordinary measure of climbing up on the roof with their friend. Ripping open a hole they lowered him down on his mat directly in front of Jesus.

The gospel writer Mark describes the result of this effort with the simple phrase, “**Jesus saw their faith.**” Interestingly, there is no specific mention of the faith of the man needing to be healed. And there is no public confession of faith accompanying these actions because the actions themselves spoke of their confidence in Jesus’ ability. **This healing miracle describes the cure of a paralyzed man in response not to his faith but to the faith shown by his friends.**

So here’s the main point I’d like you to take from this sermon. **Have you ever considered that it may be the faith and actions of your family and friends and community that helps contribute to your healing and wholeness?**

Have you ever considered that it may be by your faith and actions that a family member or friend has found healing and wholeness?

The friends of the paralyzed man were willing to do whatever it took to help their friend. And it took all four of them, working together, to do it! They operate under the principle: ***If you can’t go in through the door, then go in through the roof! That’s not a bad operating procedure for us to follow.***

These friends did not give up. **Their very actions, therefore, acted as prayers**, expressing their faith, hope, and love. Their example, therefore, should give us strong encouragement to intercede for those who are ill or in special need. It should give us courage to accompany our prayers with very real actions. **Yes, we need to pray for others and we need others to pray for us – and sometimes that means we need to act. And often that may require asking others to join with us.**

The paralyzed man was not healed as a reward for his own faith, but because Jesus was moved by the faith of his friends, his community. This leads us to the conclusion that **while our individual faith is important, so is the faith and actions of this community.**

To use the imagery of today’s story, sometimes you may find yourself like the paralyzed person laying on the mat, relying on the help of your family, friends and community to carry you; at other times you may need to be like one of the mat carriers, joining with family, friends and this community of faith to help another.

So give thanks to God, as well as to those who have been, or currently are, “mat carriers” in your life – those willing to rip a hole in a roof to help bring you to healing and wholeness. And be willing to be a “mat carrier” for others. In fact, let us be a congregation of mat carriers.

Amen.