

# Overcoming 'Paralysis'

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

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Two of the major themes of Jesus' ministry, healing and forgiveness, have been woven together by Mark in his telling of the story of the paralyzed man who was brought to Jesus by four friends.

When you think about it, it's actually a strange combination. A man comes to Jesus to be healed, but the words Jesus speaks are not "You are healed," or the familiar "Your faith has made you well," but rather, "Your sins are forgiven." Who said anything about sin? And the story surprisingly shifts from an issue of healing to an argument about who has the power and authority to forgive sins. The story then ends with the man picking up his mat and walking home.

Many biblical scholars have concluded, based on the evidence in this story and by comparing it with similar healing stories in the other gospel accounts, that Mark has actually *combined* two stories, inserting the episode dealing with forgiveness into what was originally a healing story. Once again we are faced with a biblical passage that most likely does not reflect a literally historical event, but rather a point that the author is trying to make. We need to try to understand what that point was.

Here's one idea. At the time when Mark wrote down this story the early church was in a heated debate with the Jewish authorities over the Christian claim to impart the forgiveness of sins through the sacraments. **Most likely, then, Mark was reading the convictions of his later Christian faith community back into an incident in Jesus' life.** If this is the case, then the outcome of the story, the man being healed, is evidence that through Jesus comes the power to forgive sins, a power, the Jews contested, only God had. **Mark's story, then, serves to be less about a healing and more about Christology – their belief of who Jesus was.**

Why do I, you may wonder, side with modern progressive scholarship rather than a literal reading of this text? Well, if taken as literally and historically accurate, this story forces us to make the connection between healing and forgiveness, between sickness and sin. We know that the ancient Hebrews living in Old Testament times believed in a connection between the two, as we discussed last week as it pertained to the disease of leprosy. If a person was sick, then it was a reflection on that person's spiritual condition – sickness was often interpreted as God's disfavor and even punishment for sin. By Jesus' time this connection still existed, but perhaps not as firmly. Amazingly, a lot of people today still choose to make this connection.

I'm sure there has been more than one legalistic sermon on this biblical story that ended with something like, "If you want to be physically cured of your disease or affliction, then you first must get your spiritual house in order and ask for God's forgiveness." Granted, since we all sin it's always a good idea to ask for God's forgiveness. And there's always the issue of facing consequences for our actions, some of which may indeed lead to illness or disease.

**Consequences, however, are not at all the same as the theological conclusions that our maladies are punishment by an angry and offended God.** It would be a mistake, therefore, to extrapolate from this story a general principle that all illness (or paralysis in particular) is the result of sin, or that forgiveness of sins leads to a physical cure. Nowhere is the issue of sin mentioned, for example, in connection with any of the dozen other healings and exorcisms in the gospel of Mark.

There is modern day evidence, nonetheless, that persons suffering from a chronic sense of guilt or self-hate can have related physical ailments. In these cases, therefore, a relief from guilt or shame may help aid in physical healing as well. That's what's often referred to as a **holistic approach to wellness** – the combination of medical, spiritual and emotional practices that can aid each other in the healing process.

This story in Mark is not ultimately about the origin of illness or a disability, but a story about Jesus and his ability to bring healing and forgiveness – therefore wholeness – to others. Yet one biblical commentator writes, “Many people today are offended by talk of sin and forgiveness. Some say that sin-talk is bad for our self-esteem. Others think that forgiveness comes from within ourselves, not from God.” I know a response to these comments would lead to a lively sermon, and perhaps even a rebuttal by some in the congregation. So I think I'll just quickly move on to the real point I want to make this morning.

In past sermons on this biblical story, I have focused on the specific element of the four friends who went to such great lengths to get their paralyzed friend the help he needed. **I love the point it makes about what it means to be a friend – one who helps carry the mat of another in search of wholeness.** Their example should give us strong encouragement to actively intercede or advocate for those who are ill or in special need. **It should give us courage to put our prayers for healing into deeds and actions of loving compassion.** That's why our weekly time of sharing our joys and concerns as a congregation, followed by prayer, is such a vital part of our worship service and ministry.

Mark describes the result of the effort of the four friends with the simple statement, “Jesus saw *their* faith.” Interestingly, there is no mention of the faith of the man needing to be healed. It is easily overlooked, but cannot be overemphasized that this healing miracle describes the cure of a paralyzed man in response to the faith shown by his friends. That lead to a couple of important questions:

- Have you ever considered that it may be the faith of your family and friends that contributes to your healing and wholeness and well-being?
- Have you ever considered that it may be by *your* faith that a family member or friend has found healing?

**And by healing, I don't necessarily connect that with the word, “cure.” We all know that there are many afflictions for which there are no medical cures. But that does not mean that the person who is ill cannot be healed – an element of which may mean the acceptance of the reality of the situation.**

While it may be easier to see ourselves in the role of being a mat carrier for someone in need, we must also face the reality that sometimes you and I are like the paralyzed person lying on the mat itself. Last June, at the Tri-Presbytery meeting held in Stillwater, the sermon was delivered by the Moderator of the General Assembly of the

PCUSA, Elder Cynthia Bolbach of Washington D.C. Using the same text as our Gospel reading this morning, she told us how **each one of us is paralyzed in our own way**. She specifically mentioned that occurring in connection with our response to the death of a loved one.

The moderator also talked about the Presbyterian denomination as a whole, comparing it to the man who was paralyzed. She stated, **“Our denomination is that paralyzed man, paralyzed by fatigue, uncertainty, fear, grief over the loss of the kind of church some of us have known and loved all our lives.”** Her point is that we, with God's healing presence and all of our hard work, have to overcome our paralysis.

Like the man in the story who had to rely on his friends for help, she stated that we too have to rely on others. Sometimes that means people we know and love, sometimes that may be people we don't know. Sometimes that might mean people with whom we agree, and sometimes that may be with those with whom we do not agree.

It's a bit ironic, however, to talk about how we can come together as a denomination even as a **new proposal will be presented at this summer's General Assembly seeking to allow the formation of non-geographic presbyteries**. The rationale is to keep the denomination intact by **allowing like-minded congregations to associate with one another**, distancing themselves from fellow Presbyterian congregations that may be only 2 miles away with whom they don't agree on any number of issues. Perhaps this proposed solution this is the only way to break through the roof in order to bring our paralyzed denomination to Jesus, so that God can start the healing.

I'm well aware, however, that for the average church member, what's going on within our denomination as a whole isn't nearly as relevant as what goes on within one's own congregation.

So let's make sure that we continue to focus our efforts, our love and compassion, to help each other overcome whatever it is that paralyzes us. **Let us come together to see the face of Christ in one another and not only reach out to help each other, but also allow others to reach out and help you.** Perhaps that's the best way we can journey together into our second century of ministry.

Amen.