

Raisin' the Roof

August 4, 2024

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Scriptures: Mark 2:1-12

Mark 2:1 When he returned to Capernaum... it was reported that he was at home. 2 So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door... 3 Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 And 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. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

6 Now 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?" 8 At once... Jesus said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk'? 10 But 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..."

12 And 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!"

Sermon

For the record, I've actually been to Capernaum, or more specifically I've visited what archeologists have dug up and reconstructed there. Mostly what remains are outlines of buildings and a few walls that they say date back to between the 2nd and 4th centuries (CE). So, the layout should resemble pretty closely what it was like when Jesus was hanging around there. And I must add, it's pretty small - I mean tiny - and likely fewer than a hundred folks would have lived there. The streets were so narrow that even a donkey would have had some difficulty turning around.

So, the word of Jesus' arrival would not have taken long to spread throughout that little village, and even a small crowd of just a dozen or so folks would have been enough to keep any late arrivals from getting inside the house to hear Jesus. But of course, we know that those ingenious stretcher bearers quickly devised an alternative plan to get their needy friend inside. They literally tore the roof right off the place. Which goes to show that sometimes desperate situations do require desperate measures! But Jesus didn't seem to complain.

However, to fully understand this story we need to also get to know some of the main characters a bit better. Of course, there is Jesus and an unnamed man who was paralyzed for some unknown reason. We also have several groups of actors; four of the paralytic's friends, a "large" and seemingly impenetrable crowd, and finally a gaggle of "religious leaders" hovering in the background.

There are certainly lots of “crowds” in Mark’s gospel – he used the term a total of 38 times in his otherwise short gospel. But who are they and why are they important to Mark?

The reality of Jesus’ day, was that a large portion of the local Jewish population had become impoverished due to a myriad of economic, social, religious and political circumstances. Both politically and economically, that society was highly stratified with wealthy religious leaders and large landowners on top. There was a very small artisan class that did occupy the middle, while a much larger and growing peasant class was at the bottom. It was then, impossible to separate one’s social position from one’s religious status in that society.

One’s religious stature was based upon the maintenance of an intricate and time-consuming system of purity codes and sacrificial debt payments. As these codes and payments increased (which was how the priestly class were supported financially), much of daily life had become filled with objects, people, and events that could lead to impurity! Restoration of one’s religious purity, and thus one’s full participation in that society, happened through the performance of certain rituals, such as the purchase of animal sacrifices and giving monetary offerings to the priests primarily at the temple in Jerusalem.

It is understandable then, that religious purity, and thus social power, became increasingly attainable only by the wealthy and to those born into priestly families. Mark’s record seems to confirm that these social systems were increasingly “crowding” folks together into deeper and deeper poverty and thus excluding them from religious and political power.

Biblical scholar, Ched Myers, suggests the following four characteristics of Mark’s crowds:

First, they form the pervasive background of Jesus’ ministry. Second, they consist mostly of sinners and social outcasts. Third, in spite of their notorious reputation, these individuals are welcomed by Jesus into his new community. And finally, “the crowd,” in Mark was generally alienated from and feared by the ruling classes of the day.

Since Mark opens his gospel by declaring it to be the “good news,” I believe that he is trying to tell us, that this new teaching, this “good news” of Jesus, was particularly for those who were found at the bottom of society or “in the crowds.” The paralytic, in today’s reading, was definitely as close to the bottom as he could get in the religious purity system of his day. At the beginning, he was even on the fringes of Mark’s story since he was left outside, unable to even make his way through the crowd to get to Jesus to be healed. I also have to wonder if his friends were of similar disrepute since they too seemed powerless to get the crowd in front of them to give way. But, as we know, often the disrespected and alienated, even in our society, can become quite persistent and ingenious in seeking justice.

And so those “party crashers” start coming through the roof, like a band of desperadoes, lowering some crippled dude not only into the middle of the house where Jesus was staying, but into the center of his ministry of proclaiming the “Good News” as well.

Jesus was doing something more here than merely correcting the physical damage that kept this man from walking. First, Jesus proclaimed that the paralytic's "sins are forgiven." Was this an indication that he agreed with contemporary view that God was punishing this man for his sins or his parents? Or was Jesus condemning the sin of a society and a religious system, which oppressed the poor and thus alienated the disabled? A system that perpetuated an oppressive social condition that not only trapped the poor in a state of perpetual religious impurity, but social isolation and economic indebtedness as well?

Jesus' healing not only gave this man the use of his legs but it set him free from an oppressive socio-religious system as well. And finally, one more additional comment regarding Jesus' actions. By allowing the paralytic to be dropped into the center of both the house and the story, Jesus was risking not only his own ritual contamination but of the entire "crowd" gathered there.

Jesus actually reversed the modality of contagion by healing the man's legs and by also restoring him to the community and his religious purity as well, all free of charge! I guess in our modern vernacular we could call it, "Universal health care access without any co-pays!" Now I don't know about you, but this sounds like good news to me!

But it wasn't good news for everybody crowded in that little house. The religious leaders of his day, those protectors of the status quo, who were getting rich off of the system, became indignant. The story ends with Jesus focusing his attention on them and make no mistake, Jesus was on the offensive here folks. By expropriating, for himself, the title "Son of Man!" Jesus continued to heat up the rhetoric by challenging the priestly class' hegemony as THE interpreters of God's law.

Actually, our first encounter in the bible with this title, is in the book of Daniel, where Daniel had a vision of what will happen at end of time on the "Day of God's Judgment." In his vision, the "Son of Man," who existed with God before creation, will come from the heavens with full authority to adjudicate God's justice!

Jesus was telling not only the crowd but us as well, the criteria for what God will consider true righteousness in the end! It will be a beloved community that includes the outcast and this will trump all systems of class, race and gender of any carefully planned society. Mark's dramatic image of a paralyzed man rising up and carrying his mat, becomes a very powerful contrasting metaphor! This new community of Jesus is not only alive but it is also on the move! It may seem at first to be a collection of desperate misfits, but it is the only way that truly has legs and not the established order!

About a month ago you all, we humbly one better than those friends of the paralytic. Not being content to allow the city to place barriers in our way to get our unhoused friends to the wholeness that Jesus desires, we decided to raze our entire building and not merely the roof! We did this so as to better serve and be in true community with those in our society who are currently paralyzed by poverty and addiction.

The poor need housing and help with recovery, but most of all they need true communities to restore them to wholeness. And so do we! We too, need them in order to restore us to full humanness. Our old system that throws folks into the shadows and onto the streets, is, according to Jesus not only sick but downright lame! Last week, as I floated among friends at the MSMC annual assembly, lots of folks asked me how I and “the church” were doing. Of course, I shared the heartbreak of having to send folks back to the streets in order to empty our building for “health and safety reasons.”

But I was also extremely proud to tell them about our new vision for the church, of tearing down our building to create a new space for outreach. I was indeed thrilled to let folks know that I was a part of such an amazing and committed group of Jesus followers. But I must also admit to being a bit apprehensive as well. It is indeed an amazing journey that we have embarked upon but it is also a bit scary when you hear yourself say it out loud. It’s so much harder to “take it back” once you start telling other folks. Staying put in the comfort of what we know is so much easier when you keep silent about what you are hoping to accomplish. To merely tear off a roof is one thing but to raze it all to the ground and to start over is definitely something entirely different. It’s scary! There are so many unknowns and we might fail!

Which brings me to my sermon title. Now some of you likely thought to yourselves, “Poor Steve he doesn’t realize the difference between raise and raze. But it is intentional. Although the paralytic’s friends did have to “raze” the roof, we hope to actually “raise” our roof several stories!

We do this because of faith. Not faith in our own abilities, but faith in a God who wants to use us and our tiny corner in Ft Collins, to do amazing things. It’s also our faith in a Jesus who calls us to a true alternative reality. A belief that we are part of Jesus’ work in building a new community! Excitement and fear can and do mingle as we follow the one who preaches that which is truly “Good News” to the poor. And, like the crowd in Capernaum we to will, “all be amazed and glorify God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”