

GUTSY FAITH
Mark 2:1-12
First Mennonite Church
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...A big crowd of persons eager to hear the new charismatic preacher.
...Experts in the law anxious to monitor Jesus' every word.
...A paralyzed person in need of healing and wholeness.
...Four gutsy friends determined to bring the paralytic to Jesus.

Who are you and I in this story? And consequently, where are we? Out in the street, straining to hear? Listening by the door? Inside the house, perched on a front bench? Or up on the roof, poised to do some de-constructing?

This Gospel story celebrates gutsy faith. "Gutsy" is a word that emerged from group reflection on the text in my Sunday School class. I like it. It fits. It suggests that the body and physicality is involved, along with courage and determination. Gutsy faith is active faith, rooted in trust from deep inside, from the center of one's being, the gut. Gutsy faith is insistent. Gutsy faith is not shaken by social convention or political power or the law of averages. Only gutsy faith can transport the paralytic into the presence of Jesus.

There is a conflict brewing here. The religious authorities, the scribes, are vested in rigid social structures. Their hierarchies of money and power control who is deemed "clean," "saved," "restored." Even though it is very early in Jesus' ministry, he already poses a serious threat to this status quo.

When Jesus first arrives in Capernaum, he goes to the synagogue to teach. Mark 1:22: "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." An opposition is noted right from the beginning. Both the scribes and Jesus base their teaching on the Hebrew Scriptures but in fundamentally different ways. The scribes and Pharisees focus on legalism and cite many other recognized authorities. Jesus speaks according to his own understanding and emphasizes God's liberating love and desire for shalom justice.

During that same Sabbath visit to the synagogue, Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit, thus bringing him shalom (holistic well-being). In this way, Jesus displays authority not only through his interpretive words but also his capacity to heal. Mark 1:27: "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching - with authority!'"

Fast forward "some days" (Mark 2:1). After a preaching tour of neighboring towns, Jesus returns to Capernaum. This crossroads city in Galilee, right on the lake, functions as a "hometown" for Jesus during the years of his active ministry. He may have had his own house there; we don't know. We do know that Simon Peter had a house in Capernaum and the scene

for our story today might well have been Peter's house, which archaeological excavations have shown lay not far from the synagogue.

Once people learn that Jesus has returned home, they come flocking to experience his new teaching about how the kingdom of God has come near (1:14). Jesus holds impromptu house church for them (2:2).

The crowd is packed tightly into the house and spills out into the courtyard, out the door, and into the street. It's impossible to get near to the door, let alone enter the house. However, the scribes have made sure to get up close, where they can keep tabs on Jesus and collect incriminating evidence.

You'd think some folks would notice the four men carrying the stretcher and make a path for them. But no, the "in" crowd is already in and is not paying attention to those on the outside. In particular, the scribes are ensconced in their seats. They are sitting passively, holding firm to what they know and silently storing up criticism (2:6). Meanwhile, the friends with the gutsy faith have been doing some out-of-the-box strategizing.

Suddenly there's a huge disruption. Right in the middle of the sermon, chunks of sod and all kinds of dust and dirt come raining down from the ceiling. The debris surely lands on Jesus and the religious authorities and everyone else clustered around him. Yet Jesus takes no offense. Nor does he rebuke those who fashion a rough skylight in the roof above his head.

Gutsy faith is creative and doesn't mind some messiness. No doubt Jesus delights in this demonstration of passion and compassion!

Gutsy faith depends on community and restores community. The four friends function as a team, each bearing part of the load and taking risks together. For their daring scheme to work, they must cooperate on carrying, digging, and then lowering the paralyzed man down into the room, next to Jesus.

Thanks to the friends' gutsy faith, the roof is opened up and people standing outside can hear Jesus better.

Thanks to the friends' gutsy faith, the roof is opened up and someone on the fringe can access Jesus in spite of the indifference of the crowd and the religious authorities.

Thanks to the friends' gutsy faith, Jesus responds swiftly and decisively out of the authority granted him. He declares that the paralytic's sins have been forgiven.

Our Sunday School class noted: "The community of four carried the paralytic literally and figuratively to salvation. Jesus saw their faith and healed him." Listen to that again. Their faith brought healing to him. This is a different kind of intercession—an intercession of active welcome and inclusion in the community of faith.

The healing occurs in two stages: first, a healing of guilt and perceived shame—the spiritual paralysis; and second, a healing of the immobilizing disability—the physical paralysis. The first is invisible, yet predictably controversial. How dare this Jesus speak for God, the scribes think to themselves. He could be charged with blasphemy, a crime punishable by death.

The second healing is highly visible. Jesus switches from explanation to demonstration. He tells the man to pick up his mat and walk home. As the man makes his way out of the house, through the crowd, and then along the streets of the town, everyone can see that he is whole and blessed. He will no longer be ostracized. The miracle Jesus performs is a miracle of restoration to community. Everyone sees it and they are amazed.

Restoration to community is a miracle that gutsy believers can facilitate still today, in the name of Jesus. While we have developed sophisticated understandings of many physical ailments, certain illnesses and disabilities still cause people to be ostracized or to isolate themselves. Society continues to struggle with responses to the mentally ill and those alienated by other kinds of prejudices and by judgments of sin.

Through us, the body of Christ, healing and hope are to flow to the world. Our faith, if it is a gutsy faith, will motivate us to carry others, to bring others, to welcome others, into the presence of Christ, where healing and love abound.

Today I want to share with you a personal reflection about paralysis as a spiritual phenomenon. A person can be so weighed down with guilt, so burdened by emotional pain that it seems impossible to move toward restoration and reconciliation. I know about this. I stuck with my marriage for thirty years, through great distress and compromise to my own well-being. I couldn't imagine getting divorced. I was ashamed of failure tied so deeply to church teaching and to my adult identity as a married woman. I didn't know how my family would respond and what the professional and social consequences would be. I was afraid of and for my husband, yet I was also afraid of my condemnation. I felt paralyzed.

Praise God, my friends carried me. They carried me to a counselor with pastoral credentials. They carried me to church. The ready assurance of God's love and forgiveness flowed over me and thawed my fear. I confided in my family and their love flowed over me. Miraculously, hope returned.

Jesus took my guilt away. He released it to the wind. Then he invited me to walk with him, to celebration anew my salvation and to claim my calling as an agent of God's peace and reconciliation.

This kind of restoration doesn't come about through reasoning or theological discourse or priestly sacrifice. The scribes' rule book does not hold the formula for healing and hope. Jesus does.

The paralytic is healed - I am healed – others are being healed and will be healed – because lovers of God pick up the mats where we are lying in distress and carry us into the presence of Christ, his body the church. And if the doorway is blocked, they have to search for another way in. It may take a little time, it may be messy, but they don't give up. Too much is at stake. As a member of our class said, "If you can find your way to God, he will forgive you. Don't give up!"

As disciples, we partner with Jesus. We respond to perceived needs and injustices. At the same time, we must stay humble, recognizing that we still have much to learn at the feet of Jesus, about the logs in our own eyes, about speaking peace in community, about accountability and faithfulness. Another class member said, "God's redemption is wider than we can comprehend. Be sure we don't get in the way of God's work."

Writing to the church at Rome, the apostle Paul emphasizes that God's promise to his people was realized through faith—embodied faith, what I'm calling today gutsy faith. Abraham had to hope and believe against the evidence of his physical body.

Romans 4:18-19: "Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said . . . He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he about a hundred years old) or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb."

Verse 20: ". . . he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."

Like Abraham's faith, gutsy faith grows strong in the act of praise.

Gutsy faith reflects the Gospel (Romans 1:16) = "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith."

Gutsy faith mirrors steadfast confidence in the miracle of new life for all. Gutsy faith practices welcome and service.

So let us gather in, and be gathered in, all peoples together (sing Hymnal #6).

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