“Real Friendship”  Mark 2:1-12  March 18th 2020

**Mark 2:1-12**

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So 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. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. 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. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ At 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? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and take your mat and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the paralytic— ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ 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!’

     It’s no wonder that quite a few movies have been made from Bible stories.  There’s a lot of drama in many of them.  Often the stories really invite you to be present in the action, like the Gospel reading today, to be there in the press of the crowd trying to get as close as possible to Jesus in that house in Capernaum.  In a short time Jesus had developed a big reputation as a healer and teacher. Local people like Peter’s mother-in-law had been made well, and also many others, and the news was really getting around quickly to the surrounding countryside.

     Can you see the desperate friends of a paralyzed man who have not found anyway to get to where Jesus is? Perhaps they have asked others to let them in, but that hasn’t worked, so it’s up onto the roof of the house, to dig through the roof, to push tiles aside. The owner of the house had not requested a new skylight.  It almost seems like vandalism.  But these friends are desperate to get the paralyzed man right to Jesus, so that he can be made well. Jesus notices the man all right, in the midst of his teaching the people. Jesus especially notices the courage, the daring, and the faith of the friends peering down through the hole in the roof, looking to Jesus to see what he will do.  They are expecting Jesus to speak a healing word, to touch their friend.  Well, Jesus surprises everyone by saying; “Son, your sins are forgiven.”  Apparently there were quite a few healers about those days, but they did not claim to forgive sins.  Really Jesus was teaching through word and action that God is doing a new thing here, getting at the core of what ails people, getting to people’s deepest needs, to God giving people a new heart.  The physical healing was a sign of that; “So that you may know that the Son of Man (Jesus) has authority on earth to forgive sins,” ’Jesus said to the paralyzed man, ‘Get up, pick up your stretcher, and go home.’”  Can you imagine that scene when the man does just that, someone who has likely been paralyzed all his life?  Can you see the look on people’s faces, including Jesus’ opponents?  There are people with gaping mouths who make room for the one made well to leave the house, and there is a lot of praising of God.

     I remember a few years ago reading this story to a woman in hospital who had recently found out cancer was spreading quickly through her body.  She said to me; “I’m the one on the stretcher.” She was feeling paralyzed by the news she had received, as well as how low she was physically.  Perhaps you can see yourself on the stretcher in the story, or you could have in times past, when you were paralyzed in some way, trapped, stuck.  In listening to people, I know that fears can paralyze people. It’s natural to have fears as we are caught in this strange time – with the growing reach of the coronavirus into our state and country and world. Grief can paralyze.  So can pain.  So can hurts in relationships.  There may be something that you feel a deep sense of shame about. You may be feeling a sense of powerless from being abused in some way. It really knocked the wind out of your sails.  The paralyzed man suffered from shame, from powerlessness.  In those days there were no modern inventions like scooters for him to have some control of his getting around.  He always had to wait on others.  He had to beg for money.  That was the lot of the paralyzed.  And then there was the judgment.  The thinking of those days was that someone must have seriously sinned for him or her to be disabled.  If from birth, it was the parents who had sinned.  If someone became paralyzed later on, then she or he must have greatly offended God in some way. Suffering from the judgment of others can be paralyzing. I have heard people often enough say that when they feel paralyzed from whatever it might be, that they can find it hard to pray, hard to ask God for help.  The woman with cancer that I mentioned felt that way, and was greatly comforted by knowing that family members overseas were praying for her, were taking her to Jesus, and laying her at his feet, like the friends of the paralyzed man.

     In the story, Jesus is really moved by the daring, the courage, the persistence of the four friends, and any others who helped get the paralyzed man to Jesus for help.

The reading mentions that Jesus saw their faith.  It doesn’t mention the faith of the paralyzed man.  This story is a great encouragement to be bold, to persist in bringing people to Jesus.  Who are you bringing on the stretcher to Jesus?  Who would you like to bring?  I love the prayer station we have in our sanctuary in Lent – with the driftwood cross. I light a candle each week, thinking of someone who I’m lifting up to Jesus. I’m sorry that we can’t have worship in the sanctuary this Lent. But from wherever we are, we can pray. That’s real friendship, to bring the person that you really care about to Jesus, for Jesus to bring his healing to them. Continue to bring Pastor Joe Brosious to Jesus in prayer. He is in the neurological intensive care in Madison. Yesterday again there were some hopeful signs where he could respond to verbal requests. Some people in their praying like to visualize the person prayed for being lifted down in from of Jesus. This story helps us to get a handle on the full and deep healing that Jesus brings, like people needing to know that they are forgiven, fully accepted by God; that they are a daughter, a son of God.  Jesus is saying; “You are not on the outer.”  You are not rejected because of your physical condition, or any other reason. You may feel like you are defective in different ways.  Jesus declares that you are a whole person.  The caring friends in the story were looking for physical healing first and foremost, for the one they were concerned about.  He received that, and much more, as a sign of God’s kingdom breaking in through Jesus.  This healing was, like all the others, pointing forward to Jesus’ death and resurrection, his leading the way through the darkness of death, his making everything new.

  Sometimes close friends, family members, know their loved one’s needs or condition even more than the person himself or herself does and they have come to have a better idea where some healing may be found.  They may be aware that the one they are bringing to Jesus has a paralyzing addiction, or chooses destructive behavior.  The person themselves may be in denial of that, may be trying to keep that hidden.  Deeper healing will go beyond being a co-dependent, beyond helping to keep the person paralyzed. It will mean bringing the person to seek help. That takes courage, daring, and faith. Some roof tiles may need to be removed, in that quest. Jesus works healing through many earthly agents; counselors, nurses, doctors, various health professionals, through support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, and grief groups. A sign of God’s grace is that God works through Christians and non-Christians alike.  Deep friendship will lead to working at deeper healing, and not being part of the denying of the health issue. The man being lowered through the roof couldn’t hide his physical disabilities.   Mental and emotional illnesses, compulsions, addictions, may not be as obvious to the wider population, but are very evident to those who are close. Real friendship may mean bringing the paralyzed to a healing place even if they do not want to be brought, even if that person can see no hope of becoming well, or denies that they are unwell. And the story would encourage continuing to surround that person in prayer.

     We often don’t see Jesus’ healing power as immediately as those who were gathered in that house in Capernaum. We will only know that in full in heaven.  Jesus’ healing back then was a sign of God’s new reign/kingdom breaking in, of multi-dimensional healing, including the bringing in of those who had been seen to be on the outside of God’s kingdom, for them knowing that they are totally loved and accepted through Jesus.  That still is at the heart of God’s healing. And with that will come the working on the other aspects of healing.  That’s what friends are for, helping to see the deeper needs, and then working for healing, with courage and determination. That’s really a major purpose of our congregation, receiving Jesus’ healing, bringing that to each other, and sharing that with whomever we can. AMEN.

Dear Lord, help us all at this time. Bless all health workers. You have given them a gift of healing for these times. With all the isolating, help us to know that you are with us. Bless us and guide us in reaching out through phone and social media and cards and practical service. Especially be with those who are most vulnerable and most at risk. We pray for people who have lost their work in these days, or are in danger of losing their work. We pray for all the people that usually come to 12 step meetings at our church, that they have other ways to have community and support. The same for Grief groups. We pray that this time of having to be closed will not be so long. Curtail and contain this virus Lord. In the name of Jesus the healer. Amen.