



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Holy Friendship

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 2:1-12

January 30, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is a miracle story, but it's really a story of struggle. A struggle that goes on and on and on. One of the characteristics of Mark's gospel is that it is full of miracle stories. Already, Jesus has cast demons out of a man in the synagogue, healed Peter's mother-in-law, cleansed a leper of his illness, and now, he heals a man who cannot walk. And we are just to chapter two.

It seems that Jesus can do anything and a common misunderstanding, it seems to me, is that it implies that Jesus is some kind of superman who is able to do whatever he chooses. But a closer read reveals that Jesus is in a battle. He is struggling against anything that would erode human flourishing. The world is a harsh place. The world is chaotic, unfair and often unkind. It's only a matter of time before the world will break your heart, or your body or your spirit.

And into this wilderness of a world, Jesus is cast to give us glimpses of the promised day of God. But those glimpses never come without struggle.

We see it here. There is a man who cannot walk and he is carried by his friends to Jesus. But it's likely that this is not the first time they carried him. I assume they carried him everywhere. They carried him to the market and to the synagogue. They carried him to the well and to the temple. This day, they carry him to Jesus with the hope that they can find help and healing. The text doesn't tell us who they are, but they are friends of this man. We can tell that by their actions. They are good friends.

But when they arrive, the crowd is so big, they can't get to Jesus. Isn't that so often the way it is? Even when we are trying to do the right thing, even when we are trying to do the good thing, things get in the way—the good gets frustrated. It's a battle.

Carol and I had not been married long and we

were visiting her parents. I don't remember the details, but I got into a spat of sorts with my mother-in-law. The next morning, I tried to smooth things over a bit, probably realizing that the spat was my fault. I made her morning coffee. I knew she liked sugar in her coffee, so I sweetened it and took her a cup. She took a sip and spit it out.

Turns out that the sugar bowl she kept right next to the coffee pot, which was also right next to the stove, was not sugar but salt. I had not sweetened her coffee but salted her coffee. It didn't help. Sometimes, even when we are trying to do the good thing, the right thing, there are barriers or blunders.

The crowd was just too big for them to carry this guy to Jesus. I suppose some would have grown discouraged and gone home. But these friends had some persistence in them. They carry this guy up on the building, dig through the roof and lower him to Jesus.

That's when Jesus sees their faith. Maybe he sees in them what he sees in himself: a struggle, a persistence, a willingness to battle anything that erodes human life. Jesus is moved by their faith. And he forgives the man's sins.

Notice it's not the faith of the paralytic that Jesus sees. It's the faith of his friends. I'm not judging the paralytic. No one could blame him if the circumstances of life had done a number on his faith. No one could blame him if he had given up hope. This man's friends engage in an act of hope, but the paralytic? His hope may have run out. Who could blame him?

When my mother was in her mid-50s, she had a cerebral bleed and it left her disabled. She lived alone, so even before Carol and I had children, we had the care of my mother. A few years after her stroke, she started having seizures. Doctors couldn't get the seizures under control. She took a fist full of pills every day, but the seizures were constant. This

went on for years.

My mother's sister, my aunt, who lived in upstate New York, called and said she knew of an alternative treatment that could help my mother. You may think that I am a horrible son, but I had been to so many doctors and faced disappointment so many times, I couldn't put hope in some alternative treatment. I told my aunt, "If you want to take her, I am fine with that, but don't ask me to hope again." I had been schooled by disappointment and I didn't have it in me to hope. Hope is an act of courage. It is a battle against the forces that erode human flourishing.

My mother went with my aunt and I can't explain it, but she hasn't had a seizure since. I am profoundly grateful, but to hope that would be the case required more courage than I had at the time. Sometimes, we have to re-learn how to hope. And sometimes, when we can't, we need friends to hope for us.

When your hope has run out, do you know who to call? Do you know who has the courage to engage the battle when your own hope has failed?

Fred Rogers was invited to speak to the National Press Club. This group is accustomed to hearing speeches from heavyweights and some members of the press had privately joked that with "Mister Rogers" on the podium, they were probably in for a 'light lunch.'

Fred Rogers said that he knew the room was filled with many of the best reporters in the nation—men and women who had achieved much. Rogers then took out a pocket watch and announced that he was going to keep two minutes of silence and he invited everybody in the room to remember people in their past—parents, teachers, friends, mentors and others—who had made it possible for them to accomplish so much. The room grew quiet as the seconds ticked away. One reporter said that before Rogers tucked away his watch, all around the room people were sniffing—moved by the memories of those who had made sacrifices on their behalf.¹

Why is that? Why would such a simple exercise move people? I think it is because even the strongest of us know that sometimes we get paralyzed by life. Sometimes, life requires more strength, more courage, than I can muster. Every one of us has those

moments; many even have seasons when we need to be carried a bit.

It's part of being human. We all need friends. Friendship is holy because it is a type of love that carries us when we need it most.

KC Ptomey was a mentor for me. He was a thoughtful preacher, a good leader, and an amazing pastor. He had been known to tell a joke or two that would never be appropriate in a sermon and when he laughed, he laughed with his whole body—just a seizure of joy. He died too young, but cancer doesn't care.

I called KC in 2004. I had only been with you a couple months. I said, "KC, I need to come see you. I don't know what I'm doing. I need to come see you before everyone else figures out I don't know what I'm doing."

He said, "Well, you better get here soon." I spent a whole day with him, just learning about ministry. As the day was ending, I said, "KC, there's so much more I want to ask you. I still have so many questions."

He said, "Forget that. That's not why you are here."

"It's not? I think it is!"

"No, it's not. There is only one thing you need to know. You need to know that when the wheels come off and they will, when things fall apart and they will, when you feel lost and wonder if you can find your way again, when that moment comes: I'm your first call. I've got your back. You are not alone."

He was a good and courageous friend to me. Do you know who your first call is?

I hope Village is near the top of your list, for when things fall apart, we want to be your first call. We've got your back.

Jesus—moved by the persistent faith of these friends—forgave this man's sins and then tells him to rise, take up your mat and walk. And he does. I can't explain that, but I can't explain why my mother no longer has seizures either. There is a lot of life I can't explain. But this man, carried for so long, learned to walk.

That's where the story stops, but it's not where this man's life stops. So, I wouldn't be surprised if somewhere down the road, one of his friends who had dug through that roof, one of his friends who

1 Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (2004) p 110.

showed so much persistence and courageous hope, I wouldn't be surprised if one of his friends had his own life fall apart. Maybe illness or grief or the loss of a job or a marriage or he did something of which he was ashamed. I wouldn't be surprised if the circumstance arose when the one who carried needed to be carried, and the one who was carried became the

carrier. Maybe. Here is what I know: sometimes we need to be carried and sometimes we need to do the carrying. Both are human, so both are holy.

If you feel that you are on the mat and life has paralyzed you a bit, remember we are here. We will be your first call. You are not alone.