

“The Capernaum Caper”

Mark 2:1-12 (NRSV)

Alpine hikers have told me that when they were caught in a brewing storm, they've seen the hair of their fellow-hikers stand out straight from their heads like radiant crowns, while the metal frames of their backpacks glowed with eerie, neon-like blue light called “**St. Elmo's fire.**” The same phenomenon has been recorded by **sailors** from ancient times onward when they've see the tops of their ships' masts crowned with a ghostly aura of flickering light. Although it may seem to be a mystery to most of us, in all cases it means that **the air is charged with electricity** and lightning (and subsequent thunder) is imminent. For hikers this means it's time to discard the packs and to take cover. It can be a dangerous time; it's definitely an exciting time. I think this image also conveys something of the atmosphere in Capernaum as described in our text for today.

There was a **kind of interpersonal fire hovering over those** who had jammed into the house in Capernaum. The opening verses of chapter two in Mark's Gospel give us a feel for the situation. **Jesus had come “home” to Capernaum**; this must have meant that he was staying here for a while. A large number of people had crowded into the house. No doubt, some were just curious; others were new, bright-eyed disciples who wanted to hang on every word that Jesus spoke. The house was packed so full that there wasn't any more room for anyone else, not even in front of the door that led into the house. Inside, it was hot and sweaty; outside there was heat and dust, jostling and arguing. Then Jesus began to speak, and silence fell upon the crowd, and it was wonderful to hear what he said.

Among the great crush of people there were **two dominating presences**. First, as Luke's parallel passage tells us, there were **some “Pharisees and teachers of the law”** (Lk. 5:17). To the unsuspecting crowd these theological heavy-weights may have looked like an innocuous delegation from the local “Spiritual Life Committee,” but in actuality they were **an investigative committee** eager to find something wrong with the young, charismatic rabbi. Though there was standing room only, the Pharisees were “sitting” (1:6)! I can just picture them there with a critical eye and a self-righteous scowl on their faces. They were looking for any slip-up by Jesus. **The air was charged with electricity.**

The other dominating presence, of course, was the figure of **Jesus**. I think he must've been in the centre of the room. He was calm, unperturbed, and in control. He “was speaking the word to them” about “the good news of God,” the nearness of his kingdom, and about the necessity of faith and repentance (Mk. 1:2b; cf. 1:14-15). I think **the crowd must have sensed the tension**, not that they knew exactly what it was, but they sensed something was about to happen. Luke tells us “the power of the Lord was present to heal them” (5:17). **The room was charged; the atmosphere crackled; and a disturbance was about to begin.**

1. **Healing faith** (Mark 2:3-4).

What started the electricity flowing was a startling incident that happened above the crowded room. Unbeknown to the people inside the house, **four men**, struggling with a litter on which lay **a paralytic man**, prone and motionless, had approached the fringe of the impossible crowd. Their attempt to get through the crowd, and into the house where Jesus was, was met with repeated, noisy and nasty rebuffs. So they rested their litter on the ground and mopped the perspiration from their brows as they glanced from the thin worn face of their paralytic friend to the uncaring crowd. Then they hit upon an idea; they conferred, picked up the stretcher, and moved around the crowd to the side or the back of the flat-roofed house. Likely, there was an outside stairway leading to the roof. After some huffing and puffing, **they got to the top of the house** and rested long enough to catch their breath. Then they began to do an audacious and amazing thing. They began to tear a hole in the roof!

The typical Palestinian roof of the time was constructed of **timbers** laid parallel to each other, about two or three feet apart. Then crosswise over these timbers, **sticks** were laid close to each other, thus forming the basic structure of the roof. Upon this would be laid **reeds, branches of palm trees, and thistles**. The whole thing would have been overlaid with about **a foot thick of earth**, packed down and eventually hard-baked by the sun. During the spring, even some grass may have been growing on the surface. This was what the men were digging through.

Those inside heard **the shovelling above**, and **a gradually rising commotion must have begun down below**, drowning out Jesus' words. Debris began to fall on those in the house as the last remnants of earth and sticks were being removed. **A patch of light appeared**, which widened to

the size of a man! We can be sure that **there were some shouts raised** by this time, “Hey, what do you idiots think you are doing up there? Can’t you see that there are all kinds of people down here? You could hurt us all!” Finally, there was **a warning from those above**, “Make way!” and down came the paralytic’s bed on ropes! What a picture! **Above**, with the light streaming past them in dusty beams, four sweaty, impish, determined faces; **below**, the Pharisees and the scribes shaking dirt from their robes; **and in the midst** the Prince and the paralytic. It’s not hard to imagine the scene in this Capernaum caper.

We all know what happened, but let’s now concentrate on **the four friends**. **They really loved him**, didn’t they? They weren’t put off by the crowd. They ignored the judgments and protests of those around them for the sake of their friend. They even vandalized another’s property to achieve their end. Perhaps he was “family” – a beloved brother or uncle or father. Maybe he was simply a neighbour with whom they’d grown up and played together. Whatever the relationship, they loved him. And whatever happened that day – rejection, healing, whatever – the paralytic was a very rich man. He had something for which some people spend buckets and yet never find. God was working in this man’s life because his friends loved him.

Along with great love, **his friends had great faith**. There was no way they would’ve gone to such outrageous extremes if they didn’t implicitly believe that Christ could and would heal their friend. A wavering faith might’ve demurred when they began hoisting the stretcher up to the roof, or might’ve bolted when they had to start digging. “Hey guys, this is too much. You’ll have to finish it yourselves. I can’t go that far. I’m out of here.” But the four truly believed that getting their friend to Jesus would make a difference. This kind of faith invokes the Lord’s miraculous power.

Moreover **their faith was persistent**. There was no stopping them. Whenever they came to an obstacle, not one of them said, “Well, friends, the door is closed. I guess this isn’t the Lord’s will.” They didn’t leave it in committee either. **They got going!** Jesus later lauded this kind of action in his enigmatic saying, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom has suffered violence [or been coming violently], and the violent take it by force” (Matt. 11:12). Those who really want something spiritually and “go for it” are the ones who get it. When the four friends tore through the roof, they took the kingdom by violent, determined force. Such faith unleashes God’s power.

Their faith was also creative. Undoubtedly there would've been some people standing there who would've said, "Now why didn't I think of that?" The answer is that they didn't love as much or believe as passionately as the man's four faithful friends. A faith that truly works will be inventive!

This is the genius behind **radio station HCJB** – whose call letters stand for the phrase, "**Heralding Christ Jesus's Blessings**" – which, as the first missionary radio station in the world, began broadcasting the gospel on December 25, 1931. It sits smack on the equator, at 10,000 feet, high in the Andean mountains, in Quito, Ecuador, and now broadcasts the gospel to virtually the entire globe seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. The almost legendary creativity of that ministry springs from the passionate belief that Christ is the hope of the world, demonstrating that believing faith will always find a way.

Also their faith was sacrificial. Somebody would have to pay for the roof or fix it, and that would take time, labour and expense. A faith that brings the world to the feet of Christ for help and healing will always pay the price.

When **Francis and Edith Schaeffer** began a small retreat centre which they named L'Abri (or shelter) in the Swiss Alps for disaffected young people in the mid 1950's, little did they imagine how it would impact their own personal lives.

In about the first three years of L'Abri all our wedding presents were wiped out. Our sheets were torn. Holes were burned in our rugs. Drugs came into our place. People vomited on our rugs. ... How many times have you had a drug-taker come into your home? Sure it is a danger to your family, and you must be careful. But have you ever risked it? (The Church at the End of the 20th Century, 1970)

The Schaeffers risked it because they believed Jesus Christ was the way.

So we see in the lives of the stretcher-bearers **how Christ's healing power is unleashed in the world** – through **love** and through **faith**. Oh, how they loved their helpless friend! Although they may not have understood it all, **they somehow believed that Christ was the answer to their friend's need**. Their faith was **persistent** and **determined**. They were **creative** and **prepared to sacrifice whatever it took** to bring healing to their friend.

How many of these attributes are ours? Do we passionately love those in need? Even though we do not understand everything, do we believe that Christ has the answers to life's conundrums? Are we prepared to go all the way to see that our friends', our families', our colleagues' and our neighbours' needs – spiritual, emotional and physical -- met?

We've been looking at **the things that promote Christ's healing power** in the world. Now let's look at **what may hinder** it.

2. Hindering faith (Mark 2:5-11).

The real **paralytics** in this Capernaum caper were **the Pharisees and the scribes!** In marked contrast to the frenzied activity of the paralytic's four friends, **they “were [just] sitting there.”** As religious leaders you might've thought they would've been directing traffic to Jesus and his free clinic. No, they “were [just] sitting there, questioning in their hearts” (2:6). Instead of love, **there was indifference;** instead of faith, **there was only criticism.**

Of course, **our Lord saw everything more clearly than anyone else.** So **he decided to use this charged moment,** with the paralytic before him, **to make a point.** Knowing that the Pharisees and the scribes were looking for something to pin on him, he gave it to them, or so they thought. Before healing him, **he told the paralytic that his sins were forgiven.** This was a calculatedly outrageous statement. From our perspective it seems rather cruel. Here is a wretched paralytic, barely able to raise his head, hoping for a cure, and Christ says, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5). And from the Pharisees' perspective, it was blasphemy, for only God could forgive sins.

Why then did Christ do what he did and say what he said?

First, the man may well have become a paralytic through some terrible mistake that he had **made in maneuvering himself,** as we may experience, say in driving a car recklessly today, or in skiing stupidly, out of bounds. Thus the paralysis might've been the result of what we could technically, although rather hard-heartedly, call a sin. **Second,** regardless of the man's physical condition, it was clear that **his greatest need by far was the release from some real or imagined sin.** Maybe he was berating himself for his terrible condition. Maybe he was resentful of the cards that life had dealt him. Thus Christ met the man's greatest need first.

Third, Christ pronounced forgiveness to trap the Pharisees with the implications of the healing he was about to perform. Christ always wanted to get at the root of peoples' problems, and that also included his opponents' problems. Jesus instinctively knew what the Pharisees and the scribes were thinking and talking about in whispers to each other (2:8a), "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2:7). So, he flushed them out, demanding: "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? What is easier to say ... 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?'" (2:8-9). You see, these so-called religious leaders couldn't get over the fact that **Jesus had a certain moral authority.** The crowds could see it but they couldn't (Mk. 1:22, 27). Jesus wanted to demonstrate to them, as well as to everyone else, that **God had given "the Son of Man authority on earth to forgive sins"** (2:10). Then, neatly sidestepping the inquisition of the opposition, he turned to the paralytic and declared, **"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go home"** (2:11). Thus **Christ's physical healing verified his moral healing.**

Now from the electricity in the air came **a flash of lightning and the subsequent rumbling peals of thunder.** The story concludes, **"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!'" (2:12). The paralytic was leaping and whooping it up! **Spurgeon said,** "I see him! He set one foot down to God's glory, he plants the other to the same note; he walks to God's glory.... He carries his bed to God's glory, he moves his whole body to God's glory, he speaks, he shouts, he sings, he leaps to the glory of God" (The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 17, p. 167). No doubt, his four friends were yahooping their excitement down from the opening in the ceiling. And the crowd was oohing and aahing as they began to disperse. They were enjoying this. But I suspect the Pharisees and the scribes were left frowning, and muttering and grumbling.

Friends, we don't know **how the healing happened,** only that it happened. It's natural to be skeptical. But in such cases, I appreciate what neurological surgeon, **Dr. Michael Lemole,** said as he attends to US congresswoman, **Gabrielle Giffords,** in her gradual, remarkable recovery from being shot in the head a week ago, last Saturday: **"Miracles happen every day,** and in medicine, we like to attribute them to what we do or what others do around us. A lot of medicine is outside our control. **We are wise to acknowledge miracles"** (Tucson University Medical Center, AZ).

And thus in our story, **the air cleared**. There could be **no more guilt or bitterness, or weariness** on the part of the paralytic. True, someday these newly restored limbs would wither and die – as they do with all of us -- but there remained in this man **a well of water springing up to eternal life**. He was **forgiven**. He was **healed**. He was **restored** to God, and to his community. And, although we cannot fully understand it or explain it, it was clear that **Jesus' healing was multifaceted**. It touched the man on a number of different levels. **He was made whole**.

Moreover, **the tension between the Pharisees and the scribes and Jesus had been brought out into the open**. The opposition to Jesus' gospel didn't disappear, but people were beginning to see more and more in what it consisted, and they found it wanting. Conversely, Jesus' message was accepted more and more widely, and his authority grew more and more powerfully among the common people.

As I noted earlier, Luke says of this event, **“And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick.”** That power was unleashed by the **love** and the **faith** of a helpless paralytic's four friends. We can have this love as well. **Determine to love those in your circle of influence**, be persistent, be inventive and creative, and see what Jesus can do with them. Prepare to pay the price it takes to be compassionate friends. **Believe that Jesus Christ does make a difference**. And it will surprise you what God can do!

Amen

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