

Psalm 41
Mark 2:1-12
19 Feb 2012

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“Reward for Doing Good”

A few years back there was a warning going out to our congregations that a group of prophets were coming on Sunday mornings, interrupting worship. Some of my colleagues had this occur in their churches. One or two men would just walk in and start calling for repentance. It was almost like John the Baptist – “a voice crying out in the wilderness, ‘Repent!’”

For this to happen in our New England congregations is as socially unacceptable as walking in on someone in the bathroom. It seriously makes people uncomfortable. This is true partly because we don’t “do” a lot of prophesying from the pews. It is also true because, Congregationalists entrust the freedom of the pulpit to the pastor – and, as members, we all can minister in Jesus; name.

Those of us who were “forewarned” prepared our ushers and deacons to keep an eye out for intruders. If anyone did interrupt worship, (and here is a bit of education) we planned to say something like: “you are welcome to worship with us. During worship, the leadership is placed in the hands of the pastor. Comments are welcome during prayer concerns and announcements.” It was all very sanitary. But that’s not really the way life turns out, does it?

Jesus faced a different sort of interruption that day in Capernaum. I can’t help but look up at the ceiling and wonder how we’d reacted if pieces of plaster started falling down on our heads, followed by feet, then a body, strapped to a stretcher. There is quite a bit of food for thought in what happened in that house, not the least of which is the dedication of those four friends who found a way to seriously get Jesus’ attention.

Do I have friends who’d go to such lengths? Do you? On the flip side, are we the sort of friends who would go to extremes for someone else?

We can wonder whether those four sat around and made plans on just how to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus. I’d like to believe they heard Jesus was in town, strapped their friend in, and took off. Faced by throngs of people, one of them said, “the roof”. Like a reverse mission from that reality show, Coast Guard Alaska, they just dug in, and got the stretcher down to Jesus.

The man on the mat. With Jesus’ healing words, got up, took his mat, and walked. Not only was he healed physically, his spirit was made whole as well. That day demonstrated to all around that Jesus, by the power of God, could heal as well as forgive sins. In this day, it helps us recognize that true healing happens when we take care of the body, mind and spirit – ours and those around us.

Who are we in this story? Are we the ones who run to the rescue? Family, friend, stranger – when there is a need we take off without thought for our own needs?

I was on vacation with some friends on Nantucket. We were driving back out to the house on the western part of the island. We came around a curve and there were cars stopped, and people on mopeds. It looked like an accident just happened. I told my friend to pull over. I jumped out and ran to the girl who was circling around in the road, blood on her face. She was only about 12...and her shell-shocked parents were off to the side with their mopeds.

My first thought was to see how badly she was hurt...she'd broken a tooth in the fall. I calmed her down, brought her to her parents, who seemed to wake up when I put her in front of them. I asked one of the stopped motorists to call for an ambulance. Then I tried to find the girl's tooth, to no avail.

It turns out there are moped accidents all the time out there. I remember afterwards wondering why in the heck didn't the girl's family do anything? It made me realize that we all react differently in stress situations. I guess I'm calm, and just do what needs to be done.

Some wade in. Some are like the man on the mat - paralyzed, like those parents by the side of the road, with their mouths gaping. Is that where we find ourselves in the story...paralyzed? Unable to get over a loss; unable to forgive; unable to move forward; stuck physically - or stuck emotionally.

The psalmist says: "Happy are those who consider the poor, the Lord delivers them in their day of trouble." This is another rich, multilayered passage. It certainly tells us that God watches over the poor. It also says "The Lord delivers them", plural - the poor, and those who consider the poor. I guess that only leaves out those who don't concern themselves about the welfare of others. There's a lesson all in itself.

Paired with the gospel lesson, it helps answer the question: How does the Lord deliver, protect and sustain the poor and paralyzed - which could be us at any time? God gives us the spiritual strength to be the deliverers, the protectors and the sustainers. We are the friends who rush in, dig down deep, and bring hope to the hopeless, help to the helpless, and love to the unloved. We are the ones who act in Jesus' stead in this world.

And sometimes we are the ones who need to hear the message of hope, help, and love that only a protecting and sustaining God can give. We are forgiven.

And today, we begin, by taking up our mats, and walking in the light of God's grace.