Sunday, February 20, 1972
THE MIRACLE OF THE FAITH OF OTHERS
Mark 2:1-12

The miracle stories of Jesus healing people in the New Testament are many and varied. During this Lenten season, we are going to look at some of them in this sermon series. In using some of the miracle stories as the basis for sermons, our purpose will be to let these biblical stories speak to us in our time. We will see that each of the stories carries within it some deeper meanings that are not always apparent when we first hear the story.

Let's now look at the story that was our scripture reading for this morning. Jesus had just begun his public ministry and was already gaining some fame. He was in the village of Capernaum at a friend's house. Soon the news spread that he was there, and a large crowd gathered so that the house was packed with people inside and outside.

Having also heard that Jesus was there, a group of four men came to the house carrying a friend of theirs who was paralyzed. They hoped that they would be able to get him to Jesus so that he could possibly be healed.

However, once they arrived at the house, the crowd was so large that they could not get through. Not being the kind who give up easily, the four men carried their friend up onto the roof, removed a section of the roof, and let the crippled man's bed down through the opening right into the presence of Jesus. When Jesus saw the faith of the men who had brought the paralytic, he said to the man on the bed, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

Some of the scribes who were present were a little taken aback by this statement from Jesus. They were shocked! "Who can possibly forgive sins but God?" they asked. Jesus, knowing what they were thinking, said, "Why must you argue like this in your minds? Which do you suppose is easier to say to the paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Get up, pick up your bed, and walk'? But to prove to you that the Son of Man has full authority to forgive sins on earth, I say to you"—and here he spoke directly to the paralytic—"Get up! Pick up your bed and go home!" The sick man got up, picked up his bed, and walked off in full view of the crowd.

Many times, events like this healing story were remembered by the followers of Jesus and written down not only because they showed his power and compassion but also because each event, in addition to the central fact of healing, carries with it a cluster of other messages. Here is the word of God, not merely spoken, but in action. Each such story tells us something about the relationship between God and persons, and person to person.

Sometimes, though, we get so bogged down in some of the small details of such stories that we miss what the total story is trying to say to us. We might spend time trying to determine whether the man's disease or paralysis was psychosomatic or otherwise. Frankly, it doesn't make too much difference. A person who is paralyzed, no matter what the cause, has a problem and needs to be healed. Thus, in this case, Jesus healed the man inwardly and outwardly — he made him whole, no matter what the cause or nature of the paralysis. The miracle here is that the man became a new person as a result of being brought to Jesus by the faith of his friends.

Furthermore, we are learning more each day that no matter what the nature of a disease or paralysis, there is an inseparable relationship between the body and the mind — between the

physical and the spiritual. There is also often a close relationship between guilt and sickness. Each has a strong effect on the other. If a person feels guilty and unforgiven, he or she may very well become sick, even paralyzed.

What, then, are some of the things this story says to us? What are some of the truths it contains?

The first fact that strikes our attention in this story is that four men were carrying the paralytic; four men brought the man to Jesus. This point makes this event different from others recorded in the New Testament. Perhaps the man was so paralyzed that he could not come on his own power. And maybe he didn't even want to come. Perhaps he thought, "No one can help me! I've tried everything." Or maybe he thought, "I deserve this paralysis! I'm guilty and this is my punishment." Maybe he had given up all hope of ever being helped.
But note the evident strong faith of the four friends who brought the paralytic to the house where Jesus was. They believed that if they could get their friend into the presence of Jesus, he could be made well. They did not have the power to heal him on their own, but they did have the power of faith for bringing him to Jesus.

Usually, when we read this story, we do not give very much emphasis to the four men, yet they are part of the key to the meaning of the story for us. It was the faith of the four men, the bearers, that opened the door to the healing power of Christ. This is a prime example of how God often works through the faith of other people to bring healing and comfort to someone. The faith and action of the paralytic's friends provided Christ with the necessary opening.

We know that the faith of the four men was strong because of their persistence and ingenuity. They didn't allow the large crowd to keep them away. When they found they couldn't get near Jesus in the usual way, they didn't put down the pallet and say, "Well, tough luck, my friend, we tried, but we just couldn't get through!" Instead, they found another way. They went around the crowd and went literally over their heads, onto the roof. They had brought their friend to see Jesus, and they were sure that if they could get him into his presence, healing would occur, and they accomplished what they set out to do.

The four men who carried their friend are symbolic of what happens in all of life. They stand for the bearers throughout all of history; those persons who have had a persistent faith and who worked on, many times anonymously, believing in others, encouraging others, praying for others, cheering them on.

Such persons have been and still are important in the lives and backgrounds of all persons. They are often the ones who work behind the scenes, who do not get into the spotlight or have their names on the marquee; those who do not even get the credit most of the time; those who are often forgotten.

Sometimes such persons are mentioned briefly in the preface of a book or are listed in the credits at the beginning or the end of a motion picture or television program.

The miracle of the faith of others is present in the background of each life represented here this morning — people who have carried us, who have believed in us, who have encouraged us, who have helped us along the way — many of whom we have long since forgotten. Some of their names we may have never even known.

The word of encouragement at a very early age, the pat on the back, the arm around our shoulder, the listening to a difficult problem, the touch of tenderness in a time of sorrow. The letter that came just at the right time, the knowing that someone cared and was thinking of us. All of us have lived and still live on the miracle of the faith of others.

Almost without fail, in the biographies of great men and women, we discover that it was the faith of someone else that, for a time, carried that person through a difficult period and helped make him or her what he was.

Some of you may have read the autobiography of Bill Sands, entitled My Shadow Ran Fast. As a youngster, he was violent and tough, a lawbreaker who defied all convention. In his book, he recalls that one of the main turning points in his life occurred in an encounter with the warden of San Quentin prison. Sands was feeling sorry for himself and was sure that no one in the world cared about him.

Sands said that he found Warden Duffy looking into his eyes with an expression that few men are privileged to see. The thief on the other cross, the one who repented, must have seen a face like that when he cried out in agony. When he spoke, I knew at last that my long descent had ended. My life was not over. It was just beginning. He called me by my first name. And the only thing he said was: “Bill — I care!”

Harry Emerson Fosdick, in his autobiography, tells how much the faith of others meant to him during his mental breakdown when he had no faith of his own. It, too, was the miracle of the faith of others that helped to pull him through. Not only have we been carried by the faith of others, but we, too, can be bearers. Sometimes it will be our faith that will carry others through difficult times or cause others to be healed. We may be forgotten by those we carry, but no matter. Part of the work of prayer is to pray for those who find it difficult to pray for themselves. None of us can completely understand the mystery of this kind or any kind of prayer, but the experience of countless men and women has been that the power of prayer, including prayer for others who have little or no faith, is nothing short of amazing and astounding. God can and does work through our faith, through us, to help others. It’s almost as if we can be either a conductor of the power of God or a short circuit. Jesus himself experienced that. It is reported in the Gospels that when he returned to his home country, he could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief. There are people everywhere who need to be carried by our faith.

The next fact in this miracle story that sticks out and speaks to us is this one: “Because of the crowd, they could not get near Jesus.” Our first impulse may be to think — what hard-hearted people, keeping a sick man from Christ. It hardly seems possible! Surely you would think that the crowd would let the four men through carrying the stretcher.
Yet it is possible; it happens all the time. How often crowds have gotten in the way of people who are in need. Maybe we’ve been part of such a crowd. Crowds often get in the way when fires occur so that the firefighters cannot get through. When there is an auto accident or some other kind of tragedy, how often the crowd that gathers just to look prevents or slows down aid to those who need help the most.

Some years ago, at the Memorial Day auto race in Indianapolis, part of the grandstands collapsed, and many people were seriously injured. One of my friends who was there said that it was almost impossible to get the people in the crowd to help with the wounded and the dying. They were intent on watching the race and didn’t want to be interrupted. More than that, in some instances, the crowd refused to move to let the ambulances through.

It is possible that the crowd around Jesus did not even notice the man on the stretcher. Is it possible that, in a similar way, people are kept from Christ today by the crowd, by well-intentioned people? Churches are often well-attended, yet people who are in real need feel prevented from meeting Christ. We in the church, like the crowd in this story, can get so intent on our own devotion to Christ that we aren't even aware that there are others who desperately want to get near Jesus. People can be made to feel they aren't welcome in some very subtle ways. The same can happen in groups.

I have often wondered if I were down and out and not a part of the church, if I really needed help and walked down the streets of this city, would I go to the church door, or would I go elsewhere? I once saw a sign on a church parking lot that said, "Private, Church Business Only." And I remember asking a lady one time who had needed help very much why she didn't turn to the church. "The church," she said, "Why, I never even thought of the church!" Do you wonder, how do people outside of the church think of the church?

But the story continues... "They opened the roof!" It's a good thing the four men were persistent and ingenious. They didn't let the callousness and insensitivity of the crowd stop them.
We need this kind of persistence so that crowds nor anything else will keep people away from Christ. The point is that many times, we too, will need to find new ways, literally new openings, because the old ways are blocked — sometimes by people, sometimes by traditions, other times by misconceptions. Sometimes we will have to go around the blocks, wire around the short circuit, and create a new opening as these four men did. Sometimes we give up too easily. Oh, we make the usual try in the normal ways, but then when something blocks our path, we come to the conclusion that since the normal way won't work, nothing will.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." The portrait of Jesus here is particularly detailed. We see his intuition, his sensitivity. He needed no testimony about this man but could read the sufferer's history and unhappiness at a glance. We see both the authority and power of Jesus here. Both the sickness and the sin were subject to him.
"My son, your sins are forgiven"—only six words, but their meaning is inexhaustible, just as the Warden's words were to Bill Sands—"I care!" This man, Jesus knew, was carrying around a burden of guilt that had to be lifted if he was to be made well. He knew that this man needed more than just physical mending — he needed spiritual restoration.

The miracle of the faith of others! Each one of us can participate in this kind of miracle almost daily. We can also find ourselves in a group or crowd that may be inadvertently keeping someone from being helped.

What new openings will we find together in the coming months and years so that people can meet Jesus and experience his healing power? Amen.