Book 13 SUNDAY, APRIL 8, 1984

"YOU CAN TAKE PART IN MIRACLES"

MARK 2:1-12

THE STORIES OF JESUS HEALING PEOPLE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ARE MANY AND VARIED. DURING THIS SEASON OF LENT WE HAVE BEEN LOOKING AT SOME OF THEM IN AN ATTEMPT TO HEAR WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY TO US IN OUR TIME. THIS MORNING BEFORE WE LOOK AT ANOTHER ONE OF THESE STORIES, I WANT TO MAKE A FEW COMMENTS ABOUT THE OVERALL HEALING MINISTRY OF JESUS.

THE FIRST COMMENT IS THIS. JESUS DEMONSTRATED MORE INTEREST IN THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF MEN AND WOMEN THAN ANY OTHER RELIGIOUS LEADER IN HISTORY. ALTHOUGH HIS MINISTRY CONSISTED OF PREACHING AND TEACHING, HIS HEALING MINISTRY WAS SO IMPORTANT THAT ALMOST ONE FIFTH OF THE GOSPEL STORIES ARE DEVOTED TO HIS HEALING OF INDIVIDUALS. THIS HEALING MINISTRY WAS A PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF HIS TEACHING, FOR WHAT BETTER WAY IS THERE TO SHOW GOD'S LOVE THAN TO CURE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ILLS? JESUS BELIEVED AND TAUGHT THAT GOD DESIRES GOOD HEALTH FOR US ALL. IT IS NEVER GOD'S WILL THAT WE BE SICK IN ANY WAY.

THIS LEADS TO A SECOND COMMENT. JESUS DID NOT TEACH THAT ILLNESS OR DISEASE OR PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HANDICAPS OF ANY KIND WERE DIRECT PUNISHMENTS FROM GOD, ALTHOUGH THERE WERE

PEOPLE IN HIS TIME WHO BELIEVED THAT THEY WERE, JUST AS SOME PEOPLE STILL BELIEVE THAT TODAY.

AT THE SAME TIME, JESUS ALSO KNEW, AS WE KNOW, THAT ILLNESS OR DISEASE MAY BE THE RESULT OF OUR OWN BAD HABITS OR OUR WRONG CHOICES OR THE BAD HABITS OR WRONG CHOICES OF OTHERS. FOR EXAMPLE, WE NOW KNOW THAT SMOKING CAN AND OFTEN DOES LEAD TO LUNG CANCER. THUS, IF WE PERSIST IN THE HABIT, WE SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF ONE DAY WE GET LUNG CANCER. OR, IF I AM A CARELESS AND RECKLESS DRIVER, MY CHANCES FOR HAVING AN ACCIDENT WHICH MAY CRIPPLE ME OR KILL ME, OR PERHAPS KILL OR CRIPPLE OTHERS, ARE INCREASED. BUT THEN I SHOULDN'T BLAME GOD FOR CAUSING THE ACCIDENT OR GIVING ME CANCER.

A THIRD COMMENT. I BELIEVE THAT JESUS KNEW, AS WE KNOW TODAY, THAT OUR OWN GUILT FEELINGS, OUR UNWILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE OTHERS AND TO FORGIVE OURSELVES, AND OUR UNWILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT GOD'S FORGIVENESS CAN AT TIMES HINDER THE HEALING PROCESS WITHIN US.

NOW WE KNOW MORE AND MORE THAT THE BODY'S DEFENSES AGAINST DISEASE ARE DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE EMOTIONS. IN FACT, MUCH OF OUR RECOVERY FROM VARIOUS DISEASES DEPENDS UPON THE MOBILIZATION OF MECHANISMS WHICH ALREADY EXIST WITHIN US FOR RESISTING AND OVERCOMING DISEASE, BOTH MENTAL AND PHYSICAL. WE ALL HAVE HEALING POWERS WITHIN US READY TO GO TO WORK. ONE

PHYSICIAN PUT IT THIS WAY: "THERE IS A FORCE, THE MECHANICS OF WHICH WE DO NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND, THAT SEEMS TO OPERATE ROUTINELY IN MOST PEOPLE TO PROTECT AND FOSTER THEIR MENTAL HEALTH EVEN UNDER THE MOST ADVERSE CONDITIONS. IN A SIMILAR WAY THERE IS A FORCE THAT PROTECTS AND ENCOURAGES PHYSICAL HEALTH EVEN UNDER THE MOST ADVERSE CONDITIONS."

MANY TIMES, HOWEVER, SOMETHING FROM THE OUTSIDE NEEDS TO HELP TO SET THESE FORCES IN MOTION AGAIN. GUILT, OUR OWN RELUCTANCE TO WANT TO GET WELL, HATE, FEAR, AND OTHER SUCH THINGS CAN HINDER THE HEALING POWER. OFTENTIMES A CARING, LOVING PERSON OR PERSONS CAN BE THE TRIGGER THAT SETS THESE FORCES TO WORK AGAIN.

WITH THESE COMMENTS IN MIND, LET'S LOOK AT THIS STORY FROM THE GOSPEL OF MARK. JESUS WAS TEACHING IN A HOUSE IN THE VILLAGE OF CAPERNAUM, AND A LARGE CROWD HAD GATHERED SO THAT THE HOUSE WAS PACKED WITH PEOPLE OUTSIDE AND INSIDE.

HAVING HEARD THAT JESUS WAS THERE, A GROUP OF PERSONS 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 CARRIED THEIR FRIEND UP ONTO THE ROOF,

REMOVED A SECTION OF THE ROOF, AND LET THE CRIPPLED MAN'S STRETCHER DOWN THROUGH THE OPENING RIGHT INTO THE PRESENCE OF JESUS. WHEN JESUS SAW THE FAITH OF THE FOUR WHO HAD BROUGHT THE PARALYTIC, HE SAID TO THE MAN ON THE STRETCHER, "MY SON, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN."

SOME OF THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WHO WERE PRESENT WERE SHOCKED BY JESUS' WORDS. "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 I HAVE 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 WALK AND GO HOME.'" THE PARALYZED MAN GOT UP, PICKED UP HIS BED, AND WALKED OFF IN FULL VIEW OF THE CROWD.

AS I HAVE MENTIONED BEFORE, OFTENTIMES EVENTS LIKE THIS 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 ONLY SPOKEN, BUT IN ACTION.

WHAT, THEN, ARE SOME OF THE THINGS THIS STORY SAYS TO US? WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TRUTHS IT CONTAINS?

THE FIRST ITEM THAT STRIKES OUR ATTENTION IN THIS STORY IS THAT FOUR PEOPLE WERE CARRYING THE PARALYTIC. FOUR FRIENDS BROUGHT THIS MAN TO JESUS. THIS IS THE UNIQUENESS OF THIS EVENT. PERHAPS THE MAN WAS SO PARALYZED THAT HE COULD NOT COME ON HIS OWN POWER. AND MAYBE HE DIDN'T WANT TO COME. PERHAPS HE THOUGHT, "NO ONE CAN HELP ME. I'VE TRIED EVERYTHING." OR MAYBE HE EVEN THOUGHT, "I DESERVE THIS PARALYSIS. I'M GUILTY, AND THIS IS MY PUNISHMENT." PERHAPS HE HAD GIVEN UP ALL HOPE OF EVER BEING HELPED IN ANY WAY.

BUT NOTE THE STRONG FAITH OF THE FOUR FRIENDS WHO BROUGHT HIM 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 AND THE FAITH TO BRING HIM TO JESUS.

USUALLY WHEN WE READ THIS STORY WE DO NOT GIVE VERY MUCH EMPHASIS TO THESE FOUR FRIENDS, YET THEY ARE PART OF THE KEY TO THE MEANING OF THIS STORY. IT WAS THE FAITH OF THESE FOUR, THE CARRIERS, THAT OPENED THE DOOR TO THE HEALING POWERS OF CHRIST. THIS IS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF HOW GOD OFTEN WORKS THROUGH THE FAITH OF OTHERS TO BRING HEALING AND COMFORT TO SOMEONE.

WE KNOW THAT THE FAITH OF THE FOUR CARRIERS 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 STRETCHER AND SAY, "WELL, TOUGH LUCK, MY FRIEND. WE TRIED, BUT WE JUST COULDN'T GET THROUGH." NO. THEY FOUND ANOTHER WAY. THEY WENT AROUND THE CROWD AND LITERALLY WENT 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 WHO CARRIED THEIR FRIEND ARE SYMBOLIC OF WHAT HAPPENS IN ALL OF LIFE. THEY STAND FOR THE BEARERS, THE CARING PEOPLE, 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 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN, AND STILL ARE, IMPORTANT IN THE LIVES AND BACKGROUNDS OF ALL OF US. 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 MOVIE OR TELEVISION PROGRAM. 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 THESE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN LONG FORGOTTEN BY US, AND THERE ARE SOME WHOSE NAMES WE MAY NEVER HAVE KNOWN.

THE WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT AT AN EARLY AGE, THE PAT ON THE BACK, THE ARM AROUND THE SHOULDER, THE LISTENING TO A DIFFICULT PROBLEM, THE TOUCH OF TENDERNESS IN A TIME OF SORROW, THE LETTER OR NOTE 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 FAITH OF OTHERS, AND THEY CONTRIBUTE TO THE MIRACLES WHICH OCCUR IN OUR LIVES.

WITHOUT FAIL IN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF WELL KNOWN WOMEN AND MEN, WE DISCOVER THAT IT WAS THE FAITH OF SOMEONE -- OR OF A NUMBER OF PEOPLE -- THAT FOR A TIME CARRIED THAT INDIVIDUAL THROUGH A DIFFICULT PERIOD AND HELPED MAKE HIM OR HER WHAT SHE BECAME.

SOME OF YOU MAY HAVE READ THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BILL SANDS, ENTITLED, <u>MY SHADOW RAN FAST.</u> 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 FOR HIM.

ONE DAY, HE SAID, 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 THE WARDEN 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!'" IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT THE WORDS CARE AND CARRY COME FROM THE SAME ROOT.

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. HE WAS CARRIED BY OTHERS WHO CARED. IT WAS THE FAITH OF OTHERS THAT PULLED HIM THROUGH.

NOT ONLY HAVE WE BEEN CARRIED BY OTHERS AND THEIR FAITH, BUT WE, TOO, ARE TO BE CARRIERS. MANY TIMES IT WILL BE OUR FAITH, OUR CARING, THAT WILL CARRY OTHERS THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES, AND WE WILL FIND OURSELVES TAKING PART IN MIRACLES. WE MAY LATER BE FORGOTTEN BY THOSE WE CARRIED, 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 WOMEN AND MEN HAS BEEN THAT THE POWER OF PRAYER, INCLUDING PRAYER

FOR OTHERS WHO HAVE LITTLE OR NO FAITH, IS NOTHING SHORT OF AMAZING AND ASTOUNDING, AND MIRACLES TAKE PLACE AS A RESULT.

GOD CAN AND DOES WORK THROUGH OUR FAITH, THROUGH US, TO HELP OTHERS. IT'S AS IF WE CAN BE EITHER A CONDUCTOR OF THE POWER OF GOD OR A SHORT CIRCUIT. JESUS HIMSELF EXPERIENCED THAT. THE GOSPEL OF MARK REPORTS THAT WHEN HE RETURNED TO HIS HOME TERRITORY, "HE COULD DO NO MIGHTY WORKS THERE BECAUSE OF THEIR UNBELIEF."

ANOTHER PART OF THIS STORY STRIKES OUR ATTENTION. THE GOSPEL OF MARK REPORTS THAT "BECAUSE OF THE CROWD, THEY COULD NOT GET NEAR JESUS." OUR FIRST IMPULSE MAY BE TO THINK: WHAT HARD-HEARTED, INSENSITIVE PEOPLE, KEEPING A SICK MAN FROM CHRIST! IT HARDLY SEEMS POSSIBLE! SURELY ONE WOULD THINK THAT THE CROWD WOULD LET THE FOUR PEOPLE THROUGH WHO WERE CARRYING THE STRETCHER.

YET IT IS POSSIBLE, AND IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME. HOW OFTEN CROWDS HAVE GOTTEN IN THE WAY OF PEOPLE WHO ARE IN NEED. CROWDS OFTEN GET IN THE WAY WHEN FIRES OCCUR SO THAT THE FIRE FIGHTERS CANNOT GET THROUGH. WHEN THERE IS AN AUTO ACCIDENT OR SOME OTHER KIND OF TRAGEDY, HOW OFTEN THE CROWD WHICH GATHERS JUST TO LOOK PREVENTS OR SLOWS DOWN AID TO THOSE WHO NEED HELP THE MOST.

IT'S POSSIBLE THAT THE CROWD AROUND JESUS DID NOT EVEN NOTICE THE MAN ON THE STRETCHER. IT'S

POSSIBLE THAT TODAY IN A SIMILAR WAY PEOPLE IN NEED ARE KEPT FROM JESUS BY THE CROWD, BY GOOD-INTENTIONED PEOPLE. CHURCHES ARE OFTEN WELL ATTENDED, YET PEOPLE IN DEEP NEED FEEL PREVENTED FROM MEETING CHRIST. SOMETIMES THE REGULAR MEMBERS OF A CONGREGATION CAN BECOME SO INTENT ON EACH OTHER THAT THEY MISS THE NEW INDIVIDUAL WHO IS SEEKING ONLY FOR A WORD OF COMFORT OR WELCOME. A PERSON SAID TO ME RECENTLY, "REMEMBER, EVERY VISITOR TO YOUR CHURCH HAS A REASON FOR COMING. THEY DID NOT DROP IN SIMPLY TO KILL TIME."

ASK YOURSELF THIS QUESTION THIS MORNING: IF YOU WERE DOWN AND OUT AND NOT A PART OF A CHURCH, AND IF YOU REALLY NEEDED HELP AND WALKED DOWN THE STREETS OF THIS CITY, WOULD YOU GO TO THE CHURCH DOOR, OR WOULD YOU GO SOMEWHERE ELSE? I ONCE SAW A SIGN ON A CHURCH PARKING LOT WHICH SAID, "PRIVATE. CHURCH BUSINESS ONLY." I REMEMBER ASKING A WOMAN 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!"

BUT THE STORY CONTINUES . . . "THEY OPENED THE ROOF." THESE FOUR CARRIERS WERE PERSISTENT AND INGENIOUS. THEY DIDN'T LET THE CALLOUSNESS AND INSENSITIVENESS OF THE CROWD STOP THEM. OFTEN, TOO, TODAY WE HAVE TO FIND NEW WAYS, CREATE NEW OPENINGS, IF WE ARE TO BRING PEOPLE INTO THE PRESENCE OF JESUS.

WHEN JESUS SAW THEIR FAITH, HE SAID TO THE PARALYTIC, "MY SON, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN." ONLY SIX WORDS, BUT THEIR MEANING IS INEXHAUSTIBLE. JESUS WAS SAYING, "I CARE ABOUT YOU. THESE FOUR FRIENDS WHO BROUGHT YOU HERE CARE ABOUT YOU. WHATEVER GUILT OR SIN OR FEAR IS BLOCKING YOUR HEALING, IT IS FORGIVEN." JESUS KNEW THAT THIS MAN NEEDED MORE THAN PHYSICAL HEALING. HE NEEDED SPIRITUAL RESTORATION.

THIS STORY FROM MARK'S GOSPEL REMINDS US THAT EACH ONE OF US CAN TAKE PART IN MIRACLES. GOD'S LOVE AND GRACE OPERATE THROUGH PEOPLE WHO LOVE AND CARE FOR OTHERS. EACH ONE OF US CAN PARTICIPATE IN THIS KIND OF MIRACLE. SOMETIMES IT MAY REQUIRE THAT WE LOOK FOR OR CREATE NEW OPENINGS SO THAT PEOPLE CAN MEET JESUS AND EXPERIENCE HIS HEALING POWER. AMEN.