Sunday, March 13, 1988
LOVE, FAITH AND MIRACLES
Mark 2:1-12

Text: Mark 2:3-5
“And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.'”

This incident with the paralytic man is one of my favorite stories. These four guys were running around Galilee with their friend on a stretcher, following Jesus. Why? Because they loved their friend deeply and believed there was something better for him.

How else can we describe these four friends? They were not the kind to give up easily. They literally carried him to Jesus. It was these four friends who were determined that nothing was going to stop them — not the blocked doorway or the crowd.

Had one of them already been healed by this Rabbi? Was that part of the power of their faith? We don’t know the answer to that question. What we do know is that these friends, whatever their past experience, were now making themselves channels of healing. They were breaking into this house — tearing off a section of the roof and presenting their paralyzed friend to Jesus.

What a sight that must have been! Knowing what we do about Jesus, we can assume he might have given a little chuckle, a little laugh, when he saw that. When he saw this man descending down on his pallet from a hole in the roof, he said, “What friends, what love, what faith! What beautiful bearers of the power of healing.”

Already the healing had begun just by the acts of those friends. Their faith, their courage, their loving, desperate creativity, their intuition, and their single-mindedness had already opened the way to their friend’s healing.

Isn’t that part of what it means to be in the church? That’s what we’re for as friends. When we are paralyzed, when we can’t make it, when we can’t break through, when we don’t want to admit that we have a problem, our friends take us and hold us. They carry us, literally and figuratively, to the source of healing. And they do everything in their power to see that we break through.

Time and time again, I’ve known people who have intervened in the life of one of their friends — who have said to an individual, “You have a problem with drugs or with drinking, and it’s a serious problem, and we are going to take you now to a treatment center. Perhaps you don’t think you need help, but we know you need help.” And then they have actually carried that person, in love, to a place where help can be found and miracles happen. That’s what this story is all about — love, faith, and miracles.

Let’s look at the faith of these four friends more closely. This is one of the unique facets of this healing story.

We know that the faith of these 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 to Jesus in the usual way, through the front door or even the back door or through a window, they didn't put down the stretcher and say, "Well, tough luck, my friend. We tried, but we could not 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 all the bearers, the caring people throughout all of history — those persons who have had a persistent faith and who work on, many times anonymously, carrying us, believing in us, encouraging us, praying for us, cheering us 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, who do not get the credit most of the time, who are frequently forgotten.

Sometimes such individuals 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, the carrying power of others, is present in the background of each life represented here this morning. 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 phone call, 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.

And sometimes we do not even know we have been carried.

One night, a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. In each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand — one belonging to him and the other to God.

When the last scene flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints and noticed that many times along the path there was only one set of footprints in the sand. He also noticed that this happened during the lowest and saddest times of his life. This really bothered him, so he questioned God. "God, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way, but I noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you the most, you deserted me."

God replied, "My precious child, I would never desert you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

What we forget is not only that others have frequently carried us, even when we were not aware of it, but also that God frequently carries us through the love and faith of others.

One of the most moving autobiographies that I have ever read is My Shadow Ran Fast by Bill Sands. As a youngster, he was violent and tough and came from a home where he had been abused. He became 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 people 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 only 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 The Living of These Days, tells us 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, our prayers, our phone calls, our visits, that will carry others through difficult times, and sometimes, as mentioned earlier, we will literally intervene and carry others to a healing center. 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 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, and miracles take place.

God can and does work through our faith 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 in another place that when he returned to his home territory, “He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief.”

There is still another part of this healing story that is revealing. “And they could not get near Jesus because of the crowd.”

Our first impulse may be to think: What hard-hearted, insensitive people, keeping a disabled individual from Jesus. 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 still happens all the time. How often crowds get in the way of people who are in need. Crowds frequently 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 to look prevents or slows down getting aid to those who need help the most.

Or look at a church like ours. It is usually well-attended, yet it is possible that people in deep need feel prevented from meeting Jesus. Sometimes the regular members of a congregation

can become so intent on each other or on their own search for finding God 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.”

Not only do crowds of people sometimes keep people away from Jesus, but we put up other barriers as well. We build church buildings that are inaccessible to the disabled — those on crutches, or in wheelchairs, or those who have trouble hearing or seeing. Some of us, as we get older, have trouble with steps of any kind.

In many ways, this congregation was far-sighted by putting in an elevator back in 1966, that can be reached without one step. Now we also need an elevator on the other side of the building so that the offices and the lower level are also accessible to all people. And we only have one restroom that is accessible to individuals in wheelchairs.

There are so many ways that we can put up barriers for people, sometimes without even being aware of it.

Harold Wilke, who was here a few weeks ago, said that he has discovered that many people who consider themselves able-bodied put up barriers within their minds against people who they consider to be disabled. There are people among us who are retarded, and people who have grave emotional problems, and we are not always aware of these. However, those who are physically disabled carry their differences in their outer shell, the body. They walk with a crutch; they arrive in a wheelchair; they walk very slowly up the steps, pausing for breath at the third and the sixth.

We know that these people are different, and we interpret their difference to be negative and think that they somehow are totally different from us. Ironically, we do not remember that even the eyeglasses we wear are medically called prosthetic appliances, and false teeth or a dental bridge as well.

The four individuals in this story who were carrying their friend did not let barriers stop them — they created a new opening.

What an example for the church today — to find new ways of overcoming barriers that separate people and to find new ways of allowing people to come into the church.

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. Amen.