Sunday, February 20, 2000
MIRACLE OF THE FAITH OF OTHERS
Mark 2:1-12

There are two sentences in this healing story from Mark's gospel that I want you to hear again: "They could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd" and "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" We will return to both of these statements shortly, but first, an overall comment about life in God's world because it relates to the second theme, "When Jesus saw their faith."

What some of us tend to forget is that most, if not all, of the good things that happen to us in our lives are the result, directly or indirectly, of the efforts and faith of others. In spite of this truth, I continue to meet individuals who claim to be self-made, but they are mistaken. It was said of one such person, "He claimed to be a self-made man and worshiped his creator."

Now let's look more closely at this story from the gospel of Mark. It's a story about four friends who knew that their paralyzed friend desperately needed help, and they were determined to see that he got the help he needed. Furthermore, they believed he could be healed. Whether or not their paralyzed friend wanted to be healed and was cooperative in the effort, we do not know. It could've been one of those cases where an intervention took place.

I've been a participant in interventions. Some are more formal and carefully planned, and others are more spontaneous. What's common to both kinds is that an individual needs help or healing of one type or another but is not willing to admit it or wants to remain as they are. There are those who don't want to be healed. Their illness becomes a refuge, a place to hide from responsibility. Then friends and/or family members intervene and physically take the person to where help and healing can take place.

I believe this is what happened in this story from Mark's gospel. Whether or not the man on the stretcher was cooperative, we are not told. Maybe he had given up all hope and thought that no help was possible, so he was resigned to his condition. But his friends and/or family members had not given up. They literally carried him to Jesus. They were determined that nothing would stop them — not the blocked doorway or the crowd.

Had one of them previously been healed by Jesus? Was that part of the power of their faith? We don't know the answer to these questions. What we do know is that these friends, whatever their past experience, were now making themselves channels of healing. They broke into this house, removed a section of the roof, and presented 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 their ingenuity and persistence. When he saw this man descending down on his pallet from an opening in the roof, he thought, "What friends, what love, what faith! What beautiful bearers of the power of healing." Then, as the story reports, when he saw their faith, he healed the man.

As in the case of every intervention, the healing had already begun when the friends insisted on taking their friend to a place of healing. Their insistence, their courage, their loving creativity, their single-mindedness, their faith had opened the way to their friend's healing.

That's a large part of what it means to be in the church. That's what we are here for — as friends to one another. When one or more among us is paralyzed, whether it be from illness,

guilt, or fear; when one or more of us can't make it on our own; when someone can't break through or isn't ready to admit they have a problem, our friends take us, hold us, and carry us. They carry us literally and figuratively to sources of healing. 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 or family members, who have said to that person, "You have a problem with drugs or drinking, and it's a serious problem, and we are going to take you to a treatment center. Perhaps you don't think you need help, but you do." And they have actually carried that person to a place where help and healing can be found and miracles happen. That's what this story is all about — love, faith, and miracles. It's about living on the faith of others when we have no faith of our own.

In the church, we also do this through intercessory prayer. There are times in the lives of individuals when they find it difficult to pray for themselves, when their faith is weak, when they have little hope, so we pray on their behalf. They live on our faith while trying to find their own.

We know that the faith of these four friends 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 a window — they didn't put down the stretcher and say, "Tough luck, my friend, we tried but couldn't get through." No, they found another way. They went around the crowd. They 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. They accomplished what they set out to do.

The early church remembered this incident because the four friends who carried their paralyzed friend are symbolic of what happens in all of life. They stand for all the bearers, the caring people throughout all of history — those individuals who have had a persistent faith and who work on, many times anonymously, carrying us, believing in us, encouraging us, praying for us, intervening on our behalf, cheering us on. And when all the usual openings are blocked, they create a new one.

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 these people 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 will never know.

A woman who had been a patient in one of the local hospitals in Lincoln, and at one point almost died, told me after she recovered that she was surprised to learn how many people were praying for her healing. She learned through some of her friends, each of whom had other friends in this church and in other churches who were part of prayer groups and prayer chains — all praying for her, and she was not aware of it at the time.

We can carry others in so many ways. The word of encouragement at an early age, or at any time, 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 arrives at the right time, the phone call, the knowledge that someone cares and is thinking of us — all of us have lived and still live on the faith of others, and their faith contributes to the miracles that occur in our lives.

Here is a story you have all heard before, and I've used it several times in previous sermons, yet it's worth hearing again, especially because it fits so well with the theme of this sermon:

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God. Across the sky flashed scenes of 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 that written by Bill Sands entitled My Shadow Ran Fast. As a youngster, he was violent and tough and came from a home where he had been continually abused. He became a lawbreaker who defied all authority.

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 cross, the one who repented, must have seen a face like that in Jesus 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 lived for a time on their faith, but we too are to be carriers. Many times in our life together, it will be our faith, our caring, our prayers, our phone calls, our visits, that will carry others through difficult times. There are times too when we will intervene and physically take someone to a place of healing.

Now let's consider that other key sentence in this story: "They could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd." It hardly seems possible. Surely you would think the crowd would let the four men 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. When firefighters are working to extinguish a burning building, crowds can gather and tend to get in the way. When there is an auto accident or some other kind of tragedy, how often crowds quickly gather in curiosity and can make it difficult for those who are there to provide first aid to get through.

Or consider a church such as ours. It is usually well attended, yet it is possible that people in deep need feel prevented from having their spiritual needs met. Sometimes we, the regular members of the congregation, can become so intent on our own search for finding God and for greeting our friends that we miss the new individual who is seeking only for a word of comfort or welcome. We miss the person who needs to break through.

A person said to me recently, "Remember, every visitor to your church has a reason for coming that day. They did not drop in merely to waste time." They are looking for something.

Not only do crowds sometimes keep people from experiencing the presence and power of God, but there can be other barriers as well. Many church buildings are inaccessible to those in wheelchairs or who have other physical challenges. We've been making good progress in doing away with some of these physical barriers in our own building. Most of our entrances and exits are accessible. All of our restrooms are now accessible to everyone, as is almost all of the rest of the building. In 1994, we installed our second elevator. If you have difficulty hearing, we have small portable radios with earphones available, making it possible for you to hear well anywhere you want to sit.

We want to continue to do our best so that there are as few barriers as possible for people to come here and be spiritually fed and healed. Most of all, that means being sensitive and open to people who are searching for healing in their lives.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man on the stretcher, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Only six words, but their meaning is inexhaustible. He was saying, "I care about you. The friends who brought you here care about you. Whatever guilt or sin or fear is blocking your healing or paralyzing you, it is forgiven." The same can be true for each one of us. Amen.