Sunday, February 19, 2006
CARRIED BY OTHERS
Mark 2:1-12

As I was reading this story one more time from the Gospel named Mark this past week in preparation for this sermon, this statement spoke to me with new meaning: “Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.'”

What’s so revealing about this statement? It tells you a truth about life that you tend to forget. Here it is! You are the result, directly or indirectly, of the efforts and faith of others. Yet I continue to meet individuals who believe they are self-made. They want to take all the credit for the good things that have happened to them and none of the credit for the bad. It was said of one such person, “He claimed to be a self-made man and worshiped his creator.”

The book of Deuteronomy in the Bible reminds you: “Do not say to yourself, ‘my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'” You have been and continue to be carried by others, like the paralyzed man in this story from Mark’s gospel. You did not cause yourself to be born. You did not choose to be born in this country. When you were young, others fed you, changed your diapers, and did a host of other things that kept you alive.

A young man, age 16, was working on his car in a garage with his dad, and this young man was complaining. He said, “I don’t owe the world a thing. I didn’t ask to be born.” He was right in one way and completely wrong in another. It’s true that he didn’t ask to be born, but it does not automatically follow that he does not owe the world anything. He has a tremendous debt to the past, to those who have gone before him.

This young man had never taken a good look around him. Everything he enjoys doing is a free gift from the past. His food, shelter, clothing — all were invented or developed or improved by his ancestors. He has been and still is being carried in life by others, many of whom he will never know or meet.

It has been said that no one human being contributes more than one millionth of one percent to the accumulated knowledge and comfort called civilization. The farmer inherits his tools from the wisdom of the past; the manufacturer depends upon the kind of brains that were more interested in progress than profit; the student in school benefits from untold human hours of research and devotion. The whole world is a gigantic legacy. You are carried by others more than you realize.

Now, back to the gospel. A group of people brought a paralyzed man to be healed by Jesus. Four men in this group carried him. The cause of his paralysis is not revealed. Whether he wanted to be healed or not is not known. Maybe his friends carried him because he was reluctant to go for healing. It could’ve been one of those instances where an intervention took place.

I’ve been an active participant in interventions. Some are more formal and carefully planned, and others are more spontaneous. What’s common to both is that an individual needs help or healing of one type or another but is not willing to admit it or take the initiative on their own.

Friends and family step in and bring the person to a place where help and healing can be found.

I believe this is what happened in this story. Maybe the paralytic had given up all hope and had convinced himself that he could not be helped. But his friends had not given up. They literally carried him to where Jesus was. They were determined that nothing was going to stop them — not the blocked doorway, the crowd, or even the man's own reluctance.

Had one of his friends previously been healed by Jesus? Is that why they were so determined to get their friend into his presence? No one knows. What is known is that these friends, whatever their experience, acted as channels of healing. They were carrying their friend to a place of healing. They were breaking into this house by removing a section of the roof.

What a sight that must've been. From what is known about Jesus, you can assume he might have given a chuckle or a smile when he saw their ingenuity and persistence. When he saw this man descending on his pallet from an opening in the roof, he probably thought, "What good friends! What faith they have, what love!" Mark describes it this way: "When he saw their faith, he healed the man."

As in the case of most interventions, the healing had already begun when the friends insisted on carrying their friend. Their insistence, their courage, their loving creativity, and 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. You are here to be friends to one another. When someone is paralyzed, whether it be from illness, guilt, or fear; when one or more can't make it; when someone can't break through, others can carry you. That's the reason we have so many Stephen Ministers.

Time and time again, I've known people who have carried one of their friends or family members, someone who has said, "You have a problem with drugs, or with drinking, or gambling, and we are taking you to get help. You don't think you need help, or you don't believe you can be helped, so we're going to take you." And they have carried that person to a place of help and healing.

Within the church congregation, this being carried by others is also done through intercessory prayer. There can be times in your life when you find it difficult to pray for yourself, when your faith is weak, when you have little hope — then others carry you with their prayers.

Sometimes you are not aware that you have been carried by the faith of others until later. A woman who had been a patient in one of the local hospitals told me after she recovered that she was surprised to learn how many people had been carrying her in their prayers. She learned this from some of her friends after she returned home.

You have evidence that the faith of the four friends who carried this man 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 through the crowd, they didn't put down the stretcher and say to their friend, "Tough luck. We tried, but we could not get through." They found another way. They went around the crowd. They literally went over their heads onto the roof.

These four friends are symbolic of what happens in all of life. They stand for all those who carry you — those individuals who have a persistent faith and who find new ways to bring

healing by believing in you, encouraging you, praying for you, intervening on your behalf, cheering you on. And when the usual openings are blocked, they create new ones. This story also encourages you and this congregation to be this kind of persistent carrier of others when needed.

Here's another key point in this story: "They could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd." It doesn't seem possible, but it happens even today. How often crowds get in the way of people in need. When firefighters are working to extinguish a fire in a burning home or some other kind of building, the crowd can get in the way. When there is an auto accident or some other emergency, how often crowds quickly gather out of curiosity and make it difficult for those who are trying to provide emergency care.

It can happen even in church congregations like this one. You don't do it on purpose, but you can be so intent on your own search for experiencing the love of God and for greeting your friends that you could get in the way of an individual who is hungry for a word of welcome or is seeking spiritual help.

Someone said to me recently, "Remember, each visitor to your church has a reason for coming that day. They did not drop in to waste time. They are looking for something, so be careful in what you do so that you are not blocking their way. Be willing to give up your favorite place to sit if necessary."

Not only do people sometimes keep others from experiencing the presence and power of God, there can be other barriers. Many church buildings are inaccessible to those in wheelchairs or who have other physical differences. We've been making good progress in removing many of these barriers. The recent improvements to our sound system have helped people who have had difficulty hearing. There are always barriers that are not noticeable to some but are to others. We continue to look for someone who can translate the words spoken in our worship services into sign language.

There's yet one more important point in this story. The man who had been brought for healing received more than he expected. Here's what happened. When Jesus saw the faith of those who had brought their friend for healing, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

I'm sure his friends were now thinking, "Forgiveness is good to have, but that's not why we brought our friend here! We want him healed of his paralysis. What's this business about forgiveness of sins?"

His friends were not the only ones surprised. The religious authorities who were watching were stunned. They said, "What's Jesus saying? This is blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins." The friends of the paralytic wanted a healer. The religious authorities wanted a law-abiding teacher. No one expected forgiveness. It was more than anyone expected.

That can happen to you and to many other people who come here. You come with different needs, and hopefully, you leave with more than you expected. Maybe you're here because it's one of your good habits to attend regularly without thinking very much about what you expect to receive. Then you hear the good news that your sins are forgiven. You could think, "Forgiveness? I didn't know I needed forgiveness. I didn't come here for that. I came hoping to hear a sermon with a few good points that I can remember during the coming week."

And maybe this week you don't need much forgiveness. However, it's still comforting to know that God forgives you, even for those sins you might not know you committed. It can also be a reminder that there could be people who are waiting for you to forgive them. In addition, to know about God's forgiveness is to know about God's goodness.

The story reminds you that God's will for you is wholeness and healing — healing of body, mind, and spirit — and that always includes forgiveness. In this case, Jesus first speaks not exactly words of physical healing, but words of forgiveness because they are frequently connected. In the world of that time, illness was often thought to be the consequence of sin. Forgiveness then was regarded as a precondition to healing. That sometimes is the case today. Forgiveness is given and received, and the healing begins.

People can be literally paralyzed because of their guilt. They need to hear and accept the good news of God's forgiveness. Paralysis can be a very descriptive metaphor. You can be paralyzed in your thinking and need to be forgiven for your stubbornness. You can be paralyzed by inaction. You are afraid to try anything new. You've given up. Someone said, "The principle, 'we've always done it this way' should be replaced with the question, 'is this still the best way to do this?'" You can be paralyzed by fear. You can be caught in the paralysis of grief and refuse to work through it. You can be paralyzed by hate, revenge, and even self-hatred. Forgiveness is often needed for healing.

Here's the good news for everyone! Good friends, persistence, and faith can heal and restore you. You are forgiven. You are released. Continue to be thankful for the many people who carry you. Amen.