



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

www.goodshepherdwi.org

“Secondhand Faith”

(Mark 2:5)

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And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic,
"Son, your sins are forgiven." Mark 2:5

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 7, 2013

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You have built Your Church on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. Continue to send Your messengers to preserve Your people in true peace that, by the preaching of Your Word, Your Church may be kept free from all harm and danger; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

The Gospels are full of the miracles of Jesus, but this one is so vivid! If you heard about it as a child in Sunday School or VBS, you can still imagine these men carrying their crippled friend on his pallet to Jesus. He's given his life back because he has four very good friends who knew what they had to do and did it. But let's back up.

Jesus has returned to Capernaum, Peter's hometown. He had healed a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue. He had lifted Peter's mother-in-law from her sick bed. He had cleansed a man with leprosy. Word spread. Now the whole village, it seems, has crowded into the street in front of the little house to hear him teach . . . but also to bring to him their sick, the frail elderly, the lame, the babies. Among them, four men come carrying their crippled friend on a litter. But Mark says, "so many were gathered together that there was no more room, not even at the door . . . they could not get near Jesus because of the crowd."

Undeterred, these men carry him up the outside stairway to the roof of the adobe house and there they do something truly amazing. They dig a hole in the roof. The text says they "removed the roof", which sounds easy and clean, but people who know about these things assure us these roofs were not designed to be removable. It was made of a kind of adobe mud and thatch plastered between wooden beams. The men simply start busting their way

through – a big hole – big enough to lower their paralyzed friend right down into the middle of the crowd and in front of Jesus. It’s a messy business. I picture bright sunlight coming in through the roof now and lighting up every little particle of dust as it drifts around the room, the silhouetted heads of the four men peering in from above.

I’ve always wondered what the owner of the house thought when he saw all that plaster and dust and thatch come raining down, followed by a crippled man on a gurney. Mark doesn’t say. I guess that means there were no surprises on that account.

Here, however, is where the story takes a surprising turn. Mark says, “When Jesus saw their faith” (the faith of the four friends, that is) he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” Can you imagine the thoughts of the paralytic? “Thanks for that, but it wasn’t my sins I was worried about. Can you do something about my legs?!”

The scribes also are not impressed. They believe God and God alone can forgive sins and what Jesus just did is an unauthorized *human* intervention. Some theological wrangling takes place on the topic. Only at the close does the story get back on track and Jesus utters those famous words, “Get up, take your mat, and go home.” Wonder of wonders that’s precisely what the man does. “Immediately, he got up, picked up his mat, and walked out before them all.”

The crowd is impressed; who wouldn’t be? When the blind are given sight, when the deaf hear, when the lame walk . . . these are miracles we understand and can appreciate. But notice no one is particularly impressed when Jesus forgives the man his sins.

Every miracle is there for a reason. They’re all unique and they all have something to teach us about ourselves and about Jesus. This miracle is not so much about plaster raining down or even the healing, but rather that verse, “When he saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” That’s the verse that stands out as odd and so that’s the verse we should zero in on. It appears the man is first forgiven and later healed because of the faith of his friends. It’s not the faith of the paralytic man

that matters; we know nothing of it. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't say, "Heal me!" or "Forgive me," or "I repent," or "I believe." He is the silent witness. What speaks volumes though is the faith of these four men who are determined to get their friend to the feet of Jesus.

We shouldn't rush through this part of the story; Christian doctrine often emphasizes- and rightly so - that people need to have a personal faith. More than once Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you . . ." It's never, your mom's faith has saved you . . . or your grandfather's. It's always "your faith has saved you." We cannot eat or sleep for another person; nor can we believe for another. However, this miracle illustrates how the faith of some benefits others. The four men believe Jesus has the power and authority to help their friend, and Jesus notices this faith and heals the man. Let's call it "secondhand faith", but unlike secondhand smoke, secondhand faith is a great blessing.

We can speculate that these four cared for and perhaps even loved their friend and wanted to see him well. They heard Jesus was coming and this is the sort of thing friends do. "He's not heavy, he's my friend . . ." sort of thing.

Or perhaps they are sick and tired of having to carry this guy around wherever they go. They have to drag him everywhere. That is, sometimes our friends can be a burden to us, a chore, a task, and sometimes we can be all that to our friends. We drag our friends through life even as they drag us, and though noble, there are times when it's just downright tiring. But we should remember the words of Winston Churchill when he said the only thing worse than fighting a war with allies is fighting a war without allies. The healing of this paralytic would be a gift not just to him, but certainly to his family and also friends.

But let's go back to the idea of secondhand faith. All of us are brought to Jesus as a result of the faith of others. We are not the self-achieving self-starters we like to think we are. Though you may have driven yourself here on your own, you did not get here on our own. You got here because somebody brought you here. Somebody carried you along. Somebody took the trouble to break through the barriers and remove the obstacles and bring you to the proximity of Jesus.

Now some of you might be thinking, "What about the Holy

Spirit, Groth? You just took him completely out of the equation and replaced him with the work of man.” Not at all! Luther wrote, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel” (Lutheran explanation of the 3rd Article). Normally the Holy Spirit uses *people* to bring that Gospel to us or he uses *people* to bring us to that Gospel. The Gospel isn’t just out there floating around like an invisible, odorless gas. No, it’s in the hearts and minds and mouths and writings of people. The point is your faith is not the result of your own initiative, but of someone else’s, beginning with God’s. Maybe he used your mother who carried you to the baptismal font much like these four men carried their friend to Jesus. That is, you too were paralyzed, not just by the sinful nature but by the helplessness of infancy.

God uses people to bring the Gospel to us or us to the Gospel. That which we know of God is usually taught us by people. We don’t breathe it in as if it were airborne theology, nor does it well up from within. It is carefully taught us by parents, grandparents, teachers, pastors.

That’s the point of the Epistle lesson where Paul writes to Timothy, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now dwells in you as well.” Paul also tells him, “From infancy you have known the scriptures.” It seems the faith was passed down to Timothy almost like mother’s milk or along with mother’s milk. It was fed to him; it was taught to him.

When I was at the seminary, adjacent to the bookstore was a whole room full of donated books. There’s a long and rich tradition of retired pastors passing their libraries on to young pastors or seminarians. Sometimes their widows and children box up dad’s old library and haul it down to the seminary. In any event, as students we kept half an eye on those tables because nearly every week, new old stuff was brought in and deposited onto the pile and we would stir it up and pick through it. It was a sort of theological compost heap. There were treasures to be found in those piles: great commentaries that are no longer published. Classic books on Christian Dogmatics. Language dictionaries. I still have them in my library, and one day some kid will be picking through my library like a Turkey Buzzard on the side of the road!

Now there's a part of every seminarian that thinks, "I don't need that old stuff because I'm going to be doing something new and original. I'll be on the cutting edge!" By its very nature, however, the Christian faith is not original. It is inherited, passed on and received and passed on again. There's nothing new under the sun here. Maybe it sometimes sounds new because something was overlooked and buried. But then someone started reading the old books again, and unearthed some treasures and dusted them off. But they're not new.

The point we are here not on our own initiative but on someone else's. And here's where you come in. Hopefully it won't stop with you. Hopefully you will bring the Gospel to someone, or you will bring someone to the Gospel, as in our text. Either way, this treasured faith must be passed on. Paul calls it "the good deposit entrusted to you."

That's the point of our psalm today: "We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord. . . that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God."

Like Timothy we are heirs of the faith of others. We are here because of the faith and work and effort and perseverance and love of others. We owe God our praise and thanks for that because without them we would not or could not have come on our own.

Dostoyevsky once said that when he could not believe, he went to church and in the congregation's worship his unbelief was gathered up in the belief of the people and that he was carried along by the faith of his friends. Likewise when we pray together, we are always praying on behalf of those among us who, for whatever reason, are not able to pray this morning. When we sing, we carry with us those who are down, unable to sing. When we stand and confess together, "I believe in God the Father Almighty" we may be propping up those who today have little faith left, who are dry and tired and worn out. When we give, we give also for those who cannot.

Secondhand faith. We didn't get here on our own and it is not for ourselves alone that we are here. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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