

Radical Hospitality

For the children:

Do you know what this is? (*I have a baby's car seat.*)

Of course, you do. Some are fancy and some are plain, but they all help protect a baby in a car. We also have baby carriers, don't we? Adults use them to carry small children from place to place.

Do you think I would fit in this car seat?

What would happen if someone needed to carry me?

We'd probably use what we call a stretcher. It's kind of like a flat board that two or three or four people could grab and carry me.

When I was a Volunteer Firefighter, we learned to carry people on stretchers. Part of our training was to allow other people to carry us. I learned it's kinda scary. You can't move your hands because they're tied down. You can't move your legs because they're tied down. You can't move your head because there's a strap around your head, too.

And then you go up and down . . . and if it's icy outside, you might even get dropped – we never dropped anyone, though.

Most people don't like to be carried on a stretcher. But when you're hurt bad, you don't argue, you just do what people tell you to do.

In the Bible story today, a man is carried on a stretcher. When you listen to the story, I want you to imagine what it would be like to be carried like that. Remember, your hands and feet are tied down. Your head can't move so all you can see is the ceiling – or the sky if you're outside.

When we read the scripture, close your eyes and imagine you're that man and think about how you would feel if it was you.

Let's pray:

Dear Jesus, thank you for car seats that protect us and for stretchers to carry people when they're hurt. Thank you for always taking care of us. Amen.

After a few days, Jesus went back to Capernaum, and people heard that he was at home. So many gathered that there was no longer space, not even near the door. Jesus was speaking the word to them. Some people arrived, and four of them were bringing to him a man who was paralyzed. They couldn't carry him through the crowd, so they tore off part of the roof above where Jesus was. When they had made an opening, they lowered the mat on which the paralyzed man was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven!" Some legal experts were sitting there, muttering among themselves, "Why does he speak this way? He's insulting God. Only the one God can forgive sins." Jesus immediately recognized what they were discussing, and he said to them, "Why do you fill your minds with these questions? Which is easier—to say to a paralyzed person, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take up your bed, and walk'? But so you will know that the Human One has authority on the earth to forgive sins"—he said to the man who was paralyzed, "Get up, take your mat, and go home." Jesus raised him up, and right away he

picked up his mat and walked out in front of everybody. They were all amazed and praised God, saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this!”

Mk. 2:1-12 (C.E.B.)

For the adults:

There are so many fascinating aspects of the story Randy Pinkerton read. I don’t know if there is a particular perspective that caught your attention; I thought of at least four different ways to hear it.

As I suggested with the children, we could pay attention to the man who was carried to Jesus. He might be asking, “Where are they carrying me?” First, they take him to the roof, then they lower him. How far down is the floor? Are the ropes long enough? Strong enough?

Whenever I think of his experience, I feel his anxieties. I also want him to have a name, to be more than a man with a disability.¹ We don’t know how long the man has been unable to walk. We don’t know if he was born this way or if he acquired his disability later in life. We don’t know if he broke a leg while fixing a roof – imagine the irony of that! We only know he is unable to walk.

In that sense, he is not much different than our daughter, Melissa. He is like any number of people who have been easily overlooked and ignored by society.

Of course, we could also listen to this story from the perspective of those sitting in the room, some of whom are amazed, some of whom are aghast at the audacity of Jesus to offer forgiveness and then healing (Mk. 2:5, 12). The reputation of Jesus has already been growing (Mk. 2:2). Crowds gather to hear him preach. Some are expecting miracles to be performed. And of course, the legal experts are quick to point out that Jesus does not have the authority to do what he is doing (Mk. 2:6-7).

Or, if you’ve ever served on the stewardship commission, you might hear this story from the perspective of the homeowner. Who gave them permission to make a hole in the roof? And who is going to fix it? When I think of the homeowner, I can’t help but think there might be a sense of anger, or at least bitterness.

As a footnote to that perspective, I might add the surprise I found when I was reading through the gospel of Mark between Christmas and New Years Day. I realized Mark writes this scene as if Jesus is the homeowner (Mk. 2:1). That was reinforced when I read it through a second time. How does that change our understanding of a hole in the roof? What’s he supposed to say, “Thanks for the skylight”?

When I realized this is the home of Jesus, I wondered if I should follow that thread. Instead, I turned to the friends of the paralyzed man.

I wondered how long they had known this man; I was mostly impressed by their persistence. They arrive late. That is not unexpected, given the additional burden of carrying someone with them. Ask any parent with young children, carrying someone always slows you down. Of course, it may also be true they arrive on time – maybe it was the crowd that gathered early. They are excited to hear Jesus speak (Mk. 2:2).

For whatever reason, there is no way to get their friend to Jesus. But they persist. They problem solve. They find a way to bring their friend to Jesus.

¹ He is often referred to as a paralytic; I choose not to identify him by his disability.

Not long after Melissa got her first wheelchair, we took a vacation. We flew to San Diego. It was a learning experience, to say the least. We learned it was much more complicated to fly with a wheelchair than we had imagined. It wasn't hard, just complicated to gate check the chair. The chair was light enough that we didn't need a lift in the car, but we needed a car with enough room to carry the wheelchair. We ended up with a van that had removable seats. But we had to pay for the car rental agency to "store the seats" that we didn't need.

After that trip, one of us drove our own car with the wheelchair. The other flew with Melissa. It was easier that way.

When we got to Sea World, we learned a lot about theater seating that we didn't know before. One place had spaces for wheelchairs near the edge of the crowd, out of the way, where you could still see but never felt like you were part of the event. In another venue, one that was newer, there were spaces for wheelchairs at the landing level, behind most of the seats. In the third setting, those wheelchair spaces had chairs next to them so we could sit with Melissa.

Each time they built a new theater space, they improved the way people with disabilities were included. And we noticed the difference.

It was like Maya Angelou used to say, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."² In the first iteration of seating at Sea World, people in wheelchairs were left at the margins. In the second, they were included, but separated from their families. Finally, it was an inclusive setting.

If the friends of the man wanted him to hear Jesus, they could have put him at the edge of the room. They could have set him on the floor where he could hear but not see. Instead, they brought him to the front of the room so he could both see and hear.

He wasn't left outside. Nor was he left alone. He was included.

But it didn't happen, and it couldn't happen, without friends who were persistent, friends who wanted to include him in the event. Friends who know he is more than a man with disabilities. He is a beloved friend.

The saddest part of the story of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 is that it could not pass congress until churches were specifically exempted. That means there is no legal requirement to make churches accessible. Many choose to do so anyway. And churches like this one include an elevator to make sure all parts of the building are accessible. (Better than making a hole in the roof, right?)³

But there is more to hospitality than ramps and doorways and elevators. There is more to hospitality than having moveable pews that make it easy to include a wheelchair in the sanctuary seating. Hospitality also includes the friendship of people who make the person feel welcome; the person, not just their wheelchair.

Jesus knows the only way to make the man feel welcome is to make sure he knows he is forgiven (Mk. 2:5). Maybe he is forgiving him for the hole in the roof? (Only the homeowner could do that.)

More likely, Jesus is saying he is just like everyone else in the room. We are all sinners in need of forgiveness (Rom. 3:23-24). Jesus is making him an equal with every other person there – even the ones who don't want him there.

² I don't know the original context for her statement, I've simply heard it before.

³ Kenny, p. 173.

Joan Martin was one of the first people I met at the church I served in the 1990's. I thought of her this week when her son posted a journal entry he made. He wrote it the week she died, 11 years ago.

Joan was a remarkable woman. At the time I knew her, she was the Executive Director of a non-profit agency that provided resources for parents, children, and school districts – primarily for children with disabilities. She not only helped us get Melissa's first wheelchair, she was also a key leader in the church I served.

Joan was a visionary person who always saw the possibilities for people rather than the obstacles. She was way ahead of people and tried to encourage others to catch up. Her visionary nature often made it difficult to do, whether we're talking about her staff, her community involvement, or the church.

Joan would see a need and find a way to meet the need. She rarely let hurdles keep her from achieving her goals. One good example was a dream of hers to create a 'one stop' shop where all the various social service agencies in the county would share the same building, allowing people to walk from office to office without driving all over town. It created a setting in which people with needs were the focus of the services, rather than the various agencies.

Of course, there were difficulties involved in accomplishing her goal. Each agency had their own 'turf' they wanted to protect. Each agency and each person involved with those agencies had an idea of where the office should be. And probably the largest hurdle, was finding a building that could house Joan's dream. But that dream became a reality because Joan wouldn't let hurdles get in the way.

She is very much like the friends of the man in our text today.

They see his needs and they know Jesus can provide the answer. And they won't let anything get in the way of their dream for him – not even a crowd of people.

They are willing to dismantle the building to make their dream come true.

That is the kind of person Joan was. And I want to be more like Joan in carrying others to the feet of Jesus. She also helped me learn that most people don't like to be carried.

You see, I also thought of Joan this week for another reason. Joan used a wheelchair. And I remember trying to figure out how to get her up three steps to the chancel in the sanctuary one day. Joan was adamant that she didn't want to be carried.

In talking with her afterwards, I realized how uncomfortable it made her feel when others were carrying her anywhere. It didn't occur to me then, but I suspect part of her reason was that she wasn't in control when others carried her – in her wheelchair, Joan was very much in control of where she went and what she did.

As I said to the children, it can be scary to have someone carry you that way.

It might be easy to start looking again at the man in the story rather than his friends. But, it isn't necessarily his faith that Jesus responds to; it's the faith of his friends. "When [he] saw *their* faith," Jesus acted (Mk. 2:5, emphasis added by me).

If I want to carry someone to Jesus, if I want to be like these four friends, if I want to be like Joan, *I* need to have faith that Jesus can meet their needs.

- I need to believe that Jesus is the answer.
- I need to be willing to cross barriers and hurdles.

- I need to be willing to knock over walls and tear ceilings apart.

I must be willing to dismantle existing structures because I believe Jesus is the answer, not the church or the pastor or any particular theological tenet.

Jesus.

If I don't have that kind of faith, I can't carry people to Jesus.

In his commentary on this text, Lamar Williamson says,

When by our actions we give evidence of our faith that Jesus has this authority, miracles can still occur. When we forgive because Jesus has forgiven us, our faith is a faith that can be seen. Conversely, when we accept the forgiveness of others, thereby recognizing our own sickness and incapacity, we are in that very act borne into the presence of God, who alone has the power to forgive and whose forgiveness alone ultimately matters.⁴

Williamson helped me see another surprise in this text. When Jesus responds to their faith, he doesn't do what they were expecting him to do. They bring the man to Jesus so he can be healed. They know Jesus has the power to heal.

Instead, Jesus forgives him (Mk. 2:5). And in that moment, he becomes human. He is no longer a person with a disability. He becomes a person, who, like all of us, needs to be forgiven.

It wasn't what anyone expected. I mean, I know no one there expected someone to be lowered through the roof, either, but given the circumstances, most people assume Jesus will heal the man, not forgive him.

If I want to be like Jesus, if I want to be like the four friends who carried the paralyzed man to Jesus, if I want to be like Joan Martin, I must have faith and I must be willing to let God do something unexpected.

But first, I must recognize the common humanity of every person I meet.

When we forgive because Jesus has forgiven us, our faith becomes visible. It can be seen by others in our actions, in our activities as well as in our speech. It becomes visible in the way we approach institutions and people as we carry them to Christ or we tear down walls and make room for others.

The paralyzed man never speaks in this story. He remains silent while others carry him, speak to him, speak about him, and heal him.

It's his friends who speak, who see him as a peer, who include him, and who make room for him. They provide a radical sense of hospitality as they make room for their friend – in someone else's house.

I like to think that's why we have a welcome statement at Hope Mennonite Church. I like to believe we see all people as beloved children of God, even those, maybe especially those who can only be included when we carry them to Jesus.

Would you look at the back of your bulletin with me. Let's read our Statement of Welcome and Inclusion in unison.

⁴ Williamson, p. 66

We believe all people are created in God's image and we covenant to accept, respect, and love one another as we seek to follow Jesus. We gather around God's table as an open and affirming congregation, embracing all people to full participation in the life and ministry of our church regardless of age, race, marital status, sexual orientation, economic status, gender identity, citizenship, ability, ethnicity, or any other factor subject to discrimination or exclusion in our world. We recognize and give thanks for the diverse opinions among us and are united as we strive to model a community of faith offering justice, peace, love, and compassion in the name of Christ.

Amen.

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