

September 18, 2016
The National Presbyterian Church
What Jesus Said: *Need a Good Doctor?*
Mark 2: 1-12, 15-17
David A. Renwick

In our sermons this Fall

We're looking at the life of Jesus

- Not so much his life *as a model and example* for our own lives
- And not so much his life as a mix of the divine and the human: *fully human, fully God.*
- But, rather at his teaching – ***What Jesus Said.***

And today, I want us to think about 2 statements Jesus makes in the 2nd chapter of Mark

- (1) *Son, your sins are forgiven, and*
- (2) *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come not to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners”*

As we just heard in our scripture reading, the story in Mark 2, is a story about four friends who bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus for Jesus to heal him. Jesus is in a town called Capernaum, the home of his friends, Peter and Andrew, and crowds have gathered round the house where Jesus is staying – both inside and outside -- to hear him teach.

In fact the place is so packed, there's no way in or out. And, as Jesus teaches, there's a rumble from above and the dirt roof begins to crumble as the four friends climb the stairway on the outside and dig through the dirt and clay between the beams, and lower their paralyzed friend through the roof to Jesus.

Of course, the owner of the house (possibly Peter or Andrew) is thinking (in our terms!) *Who's going to pay? Will insurance cover it? What's my deductible?*

But Jesus is thinking, *“Wow, what great faith. Here are these people who believe in me enough to carry their friend to me for healing and who, despite every obstacle, simply will not quit.”*

And true Christian faith is like that. It's not just *a matter of belief-by-itself.* But *a matter of belief that changes the way we live*

So, for example: If someone is crossing Niagara Falls on a tight rope with a wheelbarrow, faith is not just the belief that he or she can do it again. But faith is the willingness *for us* to get in the wheelbarrow – and go along for the ride.

So Jesus sees this kind of *active, persistent, get-in-the-wheelbarrow* faith that these people have towards him and honors it by speaking to their friend – the paralyzed man. And he says ***“Son, your sins are forgiven”*** –

Which takes everybody a little by surprise.

What they're expecting is for Jesus to say, ***“Son, let me heal you and get you back on your feet.”*** But he doesn't. Instead he speaks about sin and forgiveness.

And Jesus does so, quite deliberately, to make a point. And the point is this: that *every single one of us* needs healing. Not just from the physical ailments that we feel and experience, but

from the spiritual ailments and sin that break our relationships with God (vertically); and others (horizontally); and ourselves (internally). That's what sin does. Big sins as well as little ones. Sins that hardly look like sins at all, but which are just as deadly!

On a human level we all know this – that relationships become broken not just through *big sins* like -- lying and cheating or adultery but through *little sins* like

- carelessness and irresponsibility
- or the tone of our voice
- and not being bothered to notice what's going on in the life of another

It's the

- phone call we didn't make
- the word we didn't speak

that often causes more damage to ourselves and others than anything else – even tho' we feel so innocent!! Guiltless!

So too – in our relationship with God, for example, we forget to pray. We forget that we've been given the enormous gift of a free phone call to our maker whenever we want, and God, like any parent, *just wants to hear from us!* But then the days go by, and God seems increasingly far away until we scream at God— we use prayer to blame God – and say “where are you when I need you?” when all along the door's been open, and we've never stepped in. But we just can't see our action or lack of action as serious. Compared to others, at least, *our* sin and failings seem so small!

Back in 2008 I was diagnosed with Prostate Cancer (all is well now!) that was progressing, and had robotic surgery to remove the prostate and the cancer. Surgery was successful, but in some ways the whole experience felt rather bizarre or surreal, because as far as I was concerned I was perfectly healthy. I had no felt symptoms at all. I had no indication at all that nasty little cancer cells, intent on my demise, were growing inside my body!

In fact, all I had to go on was the testimony of my urologist, my physician, and his interpretation of the test results – *which I happened to believe.*

I had no clue that I was sick when the truth was – that I was!! – and I needed to be told!

And in a sense that's what Jesus is saying when he says to the man “*Son, your sins are forgiven.*” – and especially as he goes on to heal him physically.

Listen, I care about your body, I really do. But I also care about your soul. And whether you know it or not, you've got things going on inside you that alienate you from God (and from others, and from yourself) and that's a problem even more serious than your presenting problem. AND I want to take care of that as well – and I can! Will you let me? Will you let me take care not only of your body, but of your eternal relationship with God and with your own soul?

“Son! Your sins are forgiven!”

On the face of it, of course, this is a pretty arrogant statement! – The arrogance of which was not lost on the religious leaders who were checking Jesus out.

When they heard Jesus say “*Son, your sins are forgiven,*” they did not hear Jesus speaking like we pastors speak in our worship services, in what we call “The Declaration of Pardon.” But, rather, they heard him speak in a way that sounded blasphemous: as if Jesus were God!

Sunday by Sunday, we pastors don’t actually “forgive sins” – and we don’t pretend to! What we do is “to declare forgiveness.” We pass on the vital message that *it is God who forgives and who has the power to heal our lives.* And *our role* is just to be the messengers.

BUT that’s not what Jesus was doing when he spoke to the man! At least, that’s not how those listening understood it. What they heard was the arrogance of someone who was actually stepping in for God, and doing the forgiving. AS IF HE WERE GOD!

So, immediately they became furious and cried out

“Blasphemy! You can’t do that! You’re acting as if you’re God! You sound as if you’re the one forgiving the sin directly — and only God can do that!”

And, in response, Jesus *doesn’t* argue or apologize! He *doesn’t* say

“You are soooo right! I’m sounding a little uppity here. I apologize.”

Rather, what he says is:

“Ok, if you’ve got a problem with what I’m saying, watch this! Just to confirm that I really do have the power to heal spiritual ailments and sins that are invisible (which no one can see), let me heal the physical ailments of this man which are clearly visible (which everyone can see).

And he does it! And all are stunned!

But while some people are stunned into happiness and excitement, the religious leaders are not: they are stunned into anger!!

Instead of being lovers of God and people, they see themselves more as “guardians of God’s truth” with an approach to faith

- which is intent on drawing boundaries that keep people out
- making people pay for their broken relationships with God and others
- rather than welcoming them in, no matter what they’ve done or where they’ve been.

and while there were certainly times when Jesus acted as “the guardian of the faith”

- *a time, for example, when a rich man leaves Jesus in tears*
- *and when Jesus causes havoc in the temple!!*

Nevertheless, Jesus “as the guardian of the truth” – the gate keeper, with a passion to keep people out – was very secondary to his passion to broaden the circle, to bring people back, into God’s circle and provide healing for all their broken relationships, whether with themselves, or others, or God.

As Edwin Markham’s little ditty “Outwitted” puts it:

“He drew a circle that shut me out, heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took him in!

And so Jesus, as if to force the issue, draws out this contrast immediately after healing the man: He deliberately expands his circle!

He heads out of the safety and purity of his house (think “church”) and begins to attend dinners and parties put on by those on the fringes of society whose morality and faith is suspect. Scripture calls them “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:13-17), a term which encompasses all

kinds of people who've *sold their souls to the political and economic and moral realities of the day, and who have little or no time for religion. People "not like us."*

And with this move – to eat with “Tax Collectors and Sinners” – Jesus provokes another reaction! The blast of judgment rises yet again from the religious folks who turn to the disciples and ask “*What’s does he think he’s doing? Doesn’t he know who these people are?*”

And Jesus hears their muttering and responds:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come not to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners.”

A statement which means at least 2 things

FIRST (like my urologist), Jesus is saying something like this:

If you don’t believe my diagnosis of your problem,
then I cannot help you. *I’m not going to waste my time on those who think they are well – righteous – and think they have no need of my help as a spiritual physician. I can only help those who believe and know that they are sick.*

- Do you believe my diagnosis of this man on the stretcher?

And do we believe that it’s true for us too? That WE have problems -- not only physical, but spiritual?

That’s the first thing. **And the SECOND thing is this.**

[a word addressed not only to the religious leaders and purists but to Jesus’ followers and disciples in every generation to come].

“Listen,” he says, “here’s your mission” --

If I’m like a physician -- then you must be too, at least in this regard: I go where there are people in need, and who know it! I eat with tax collectors and sinners, and that’s where you need to be too! Where sick people are – spiritually and physically.
BUT you can’t do that if you just stay within the walls of the church, within the holy huddle. You have to reach out, even if it’s messy.
You need to be where people are sick and messed up, whether it’s their own fault or not -- *it really doesn’t matter!* Don’t focus on that: Just be my hands and feet the source of my love and mercy.

MAX LUCADO (in his book, No Wonder They Call Him Savior) sums up Jesus’ message like this, with a story first told him by a Brazilian preacher in São Paulo (edited slightly!):

The small house was simple but adequate. It consisted of one large room on a dusty street. Maria and her daughter, Christina, had done what they could to add color to the gray walls, and warmth to the hard dirt floor. Maria’s husband had died when Christina was an infant. The young mother got a job and set out to raise her young daughter. And now, fifteen years later, the worst years were over. Altho’ Maria’s salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, it was reliable and it did provide food and clothes.

And now Christina was old enough to get a job to help out. Some said Christina got her independence from her mother. She recoiled at the traditional idea of marrying young and raising a family. Not that she couldn’t have had her pick of husbands. She had an infectious way of throwing her head back and filling the room with laughter. And a steady stream of prospects

were always at her door. But she spoke often of going to the city. Her mother, Maria, was always quick to remind Christina of the harshness of the streets.

“People don’t know you there. Jobs are scarce and the life is cruel.

And besides, if you went there, what would you do for a living?”

Mother Maria knew exactly what daughter Christina would do -- or would have to do -- for a living. That’s why her heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter’s bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew immediately what she must do to find her.

She quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all her money, and ran out of the house.

On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Photos! She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself, and with her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio.

Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search.

Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for street walkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture – taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note.

It wasn’t too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth, but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare.

But as she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed something that had escaped her attention before: a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror, unbelievably, was a small picture of her mother.

Christina’s eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo.

Written on the back was this compelling invitation.

“Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn’t matter. Please come home.”
She did.

What Jesus said was:

- *“Son/daughter – Your sin is forgiven!!”*
- *Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come not to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners”*

In other words:

First:

I long for your healing – and I have the power to do it. Put your trust in me! In my diagnosis and my remedy, whether you see your need fully now or not! Whether you think your need is great or small!

Second, to the Church:

We must never forget that we cannot serve Jesus fully by staying within these walls! There's a lot of sickness out there. That's where Jesus the physician is, even today. And that's where He invites us to him join in God's ministry of mercy and healing!

May we long to be where he is, follow his call and heed what he said.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2016 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800