

## Carried Away

### Mark 2:1-12

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, February 19, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The goodness of Jesus Christ is played out in the gospel when Jesus can recognize the faith of a group of people who bring to him someone who is not able to carry himself. If you are here today and you need someone to lean into, Jesus is here to touch you with healing and forgiveness, and our prayer is that you are surrounded with a group of people who can carry you to Jesus.

Let us pray: In your goodness, Lord Jesus Christ, now call us to remember the good news of your work on earth and how you invite us to come to you and to bring others along with us so that together, we might be healed and forgiven. Now may your word and the power of your Spirit provide healing and forgiveness through this moment of hearing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When something important is happening and you become urgently passionate about getting the work done, bringing a person in need to a place where they can get the help that they need, you are not likely to let many obstacles or people stand in your way. My father and mother tell the story of the time of the birth of my oldest brother. They were new to the area of Burbank in southern California, and my mother called my father at work. She said, "I am in labor. We need to go to the hospital." He rushed home, he put her in the car, and they took off in the midst of traffic. Even in 1941 there was traffic in southern California. My Dad did not let any obstacles stand in his way. Not that he ran anybody over, but he made haste and didn't necessarily wait for the red lights to turn green. There was a traffic policeman who noticed that and decided to pull him over in the midst of my mother's labor pains. He asked my Dad, "What's your hurry?" My Dad replied, "Take a look at my wife." She was in the middle of one of those massive contractions. The policeman answered, "Oh, I see. Let's go." He proceeded to usher them by motorcade through the traffic and the lights all the way to the hospital. Nothing stood in their way. Together they carried my mother to a place that could provide for the safe delivery of her child.

It is important to realize that when people need the intervention of healing and forgiveness in their lives we, who stand around them and who live life for them, have an opportunity to carry them into the presence of Jesus; and we do not let obstacles stand in our way. Jesus, in this story, is confronted with a number of people who seem to get carried away with the energy around Jesus. There are people here who are carried away and passionate about bringing their friends to Jesus when their friends cannot carry themselves. There are groups who are getting carried away with providing clear accessibility to Jesus by removing all the obstacles. There are groups here who are carried away in their resistance to what Jesus is doing, and they are rather upset by Jesus' increase of authority to forgive sins and heal.

Jesus shows and teaches us that forgiveness is intimately connected with healing, and vice versa. In James, chapter 5, the apostle clearly states the connection between these two by imploring the people of God to confess their sins to each other and pray for one another so that healing may take place. There is a deep connection between confession of our sin—to our freedom to be healed—and the ability to carry each one of us mutually into the presence of Jesus for confession, forgiveness, and healing.

In fact, in some ways, Jesus is more interested in forgiveness than he is in healing. It is interesting to me that, in the Lord's Prayer, for example, there is nothing in the prayer that pleads for healing. It is, however, stated, "...forgive us this day our debts as we forgive our debtors." Forgiveness leads to healing; it is interwoven with healing and is the ultimate purpose of why Jesus came to us. When we want healing, Jesus may give us forgiveness instead (much to our frustration.) Can you imagine what the group felt like they brought the man to Jesus, and the first thing out of Jesus' mouth, when they were expecting a miracle of healing, was, "Your sins are forgiven." Thanks a lot, Jesus. We are expecting a little bit more than that. But Jesus' message is clear: that is as good as it gets. You can't get anything more than that. Forgiveness is the foundation and completion of healing. In fact, unanswered prayers for healing may be a

severe pathway to encourage us towards ultimate forgiveness. It may be that you, in your life, are not experiencing healing because you are in need of deep forgiveness, and God is trying to catch your attention.

There is a battle here for Jesus' attention. A group's faith can carry a hurting person to healing and forgiveness. You notice that when the person who is paralyzed is not able to carry himself, it is the group who carries him to Jesus. If you are at a place in your life where you say, 'I just don't have the faith to go to Jesus. I don't have the faith to pray. I don't have the faith to accept Jesus' forgiveness,' it is all the more reason why we need people around us who can carry us into healing and forgiveness in Jesus' presence.

Some here today in worship do not have the strength even to worship. They can't sing the hymns; they can't pray the prayers because life is so full of pain. There is too much anger, there are too many reasons to not forgive; and that is when the rest of us surround them with singing and prayers, so that when they cannot pray and sing, we pray and sing for them. Many people come to worship to lean into the rest of the community's prayers and hymns.

Groups can have the faith for an individual to be healed and forgiven when the individual does not have his own faith. A group of leaders at this church were recently concerned about my health; they decided to take action and carry me, in their own way, into a healthier place. They decided to help me get assistance from a personal trainer. They were basically saying that they were concerned about my health and that it was important for me to do exercises. As it turned out, when I looked at the printout for the name of my personal trainer, his name was Yeshua – "Jesus" ...of Jesus...from Jesus. Isn't it interesting that my personal trainer's name is Jesus? Guess what? That's your personal trainer, too. I needed to have a group carry me to a healthier place in the presence of Jesus. It is true for every aspect of our lives that when we are not able to carry ourselves, we need those around us to lean in and carry us.

Today we recognize that the In Touch Ministry, a new ministry in our church, is comprised of a team of people who go into homes to carry people into the presence of Jesus who are not able to carry themselves here to worship and be part of the ministry of this church. That is one of the great ministries of the people of God—to go to the people who are not able to come to us. Meals on Wheels does the same thing. There are a number of ministries that take seriously the fact that some people are home-centered and cannot get out. We need to go to them.

Faith sometimes appears in groups that are so passionate about their mission to bring another person to Jesus that absolutely nothing can stand in the way. They will get carried away in their passion to bring people to Jesus. In this particular story, you will notice that the crowd cannot stop them, and even the roof cannot stop them. I have often wondered—it doesn't say anything about it in the text—how the homeowner felt about the roof being destroyed. Are you willing to sacrifice your roof to have a group bring people to Jesus? How about your home? Well, this home was owned by Peter and Andrew. It was their family home, and Jesus was busily healing people in their home. Their home had been sacrificed as a place where groups could bring people to Jesus. Jesus is so impressed with the faith of the group—not the individual faith of the man being carried, but the faith of those who bring him—that he says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." It is the faith of the group that brings forgiveness and healing to the person; it is not the person's faith. Do not believe for one moment that God is dependent upon your faith alone and things aren't happening because you alone don't have faith. That is not the case. One of the reasons we are in Christian community is because we need to lean into the faith of others when we ourselves are lacking.

Faith is doing everything possible to get that paralyzed man to Jesus. Nothing will stand in the group's way. They hoist him up on the roof, and they hoist him through the roof, down in the face of Jesus. And Jesus is so impressed with all their mechanical engineering abilities that he says, "I am going to respond to your faith. Son, your sins are forgiven." It is important that we take responsibility for the act of carrying one another's concerns and pain. The apostle Paul, in the book of Galatians, puts it this way: "Carry one another's burdens, and in this you will fulfill the law of Christ." That is the pattern of Christ in teaching and healing—that Jesus rewards those who bring others to him. But notice what Paul does next in order to give us a clear message that we shouldn't always rely on the faith of others: "By the way," Paul says, "everyone must carry his own burdens, as well." It is important that we lean into others when we can't carry our faith; but maturity demands that we take responsibility at some point and give up our

dependence upon others. It's a part of growing up into Jesus' healing and wholeness.

NPC is a church where parents, more and more, are bringing their children. Not only that, it is more and more a church where the children are carrying their parents into Jesus' presence. The number one way in which parents come to church today is through the leading of their children. We must make up our minds that we will be a place that welcomes parents and children in every way possible, and not to allow any of them to be blocked-out or have obstacles put in their way —because Jesus particularly loves the children. It is important that we provide accessibility, and not create obstacles. My own daughter, Tamara, when she was about four years old, was concerned about my health; it seems to be a pattern in my life. I was lying in bed, not doing well at all. She came in and said, "Daddy, I'm really worried about you. You're very sick. Can I pray for you? I want you to be better. I want to ask God to help you to be better." So there she prayed; she carried me into Jesus' presence. A four-year-old can do that for a parent. In 1997, I was on a retreat with a group of pastors from all over the world. We were studying small-group ministry together and we had broken the class of about 20 into different sizes of small groups of fours and fives. We were getting close to the end of our two-week time together, and one of the small groups had been meeting regularly for Bible study, prayer, and for building projects and relationships. They came to me and said, "You may find this very strange but, each in our own way —one of us with a vision, one of us with a dream, one of us with a sense of discernment, and all of us together with an experience of God breaking in on us —have decided that we are called to pray for you today, right here and now. Sit down and let us pray for you." Well, that's a little shocking, to have a group of people you really don't know say, "We've been called to pray for you." Having gotten through the shock, I finally agreed to it, and they explained the situation. They said: "There are two things that we are praying about for you. One is that you are about to go through some very difficult times in your life, and we are going to pray that God will not let you go, and that you will not let go of God during that difficult time. Secondly, we are praying because we believe that you are called to something extraordinarily important in the future. We don't know what it is, but we are praying that God will be with you as you are called to do it." I thought they were nuts. But you know what happened? They prayed for me that day, and everything that they prayed for came true. God needed to be with me, and I needed to lean into group abilities and prayers when I didn't have enough for myself. One of the reasons I believe I am standing here today is because that group of four pastors—two Presbyterians and two Methodists, two from the United States and two from different countries around the world—took time to listen to God and carried me into the presence of Jesus. It is important that we allow groups to carry us when we cannot carry ourselves.

Faithful leaders who lead such groups will not allow themselves to be sabotaged by obstacles or opposition. There are many obstacles and points of opposition in this text. The crowds get in the way, the roof gets in the way, powerful people get in the way, and a little group of scribes over in the corner mumbling to each other about all the things they are frustrated with around Jesus' healing and forgiveness, also get in the way. "How dare you, Jesus, forgive people? Only God can do that." But Jesus has told the disciples that faith can remove mountains. Faith removes obstacles. Faith says "No" to opposition. And Jesus did that in the face of opposition; he said "No" to obstacles, and "Yes" to healing and forgiveness. It is important that leadership is willing to refuse opposition and obstacles. Edwin H. Friedman, in his book, *Generation to Generation* talks about the connection between the systems of people's lives and how we are interconnected, and leadership. In his final work, *Failure of Nerve*, which was published posthumously, he works through the impact of how leaders are too often sabotaged by people who want to put obstacles in their way. He uses the dramatic example of Abraham Lincoln as being the president, following five other presidents, who finally said, "I will not allow this Union to dissolve. Come hell or high water, we will stay together even if we have to go to war." Lincoln refused to be sabotaged by a number of people, including some of his own generals, who would see things differently.

Jesus refused to be sabotaged by those who had a different view of reality. "Jesus, how dare you forgive sins? How dare you heal people on the Sabbath?" Jesus said, "It is what God wants." It is important that we, as leaders in various places of leadership, are not sabotaged by people who would undermine the good things that need to be done. Often the good comes at a high cost in the face of great resistance. It is an affirmation, throughout the scriptures, that, no matter what happens as a result of opposition and obstacles, God is with us. God spoke words of assurance to Joshua: "Be of good courage. I am with you as you go into war." The book of Romans tells us, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God, even the most extreme opposition and circumstances. Be of good courage."

Some powerful religious leaders, people who have religion at the heart of the mechanics of who they are, can be great oppositional presences to the good of what God wants to accomplish. Politics, military force, business, and all the systems we have are no comparison to religion gone awry when it wants to oppose God's best. We must be careful that we, in our self-righteous, opinionated roles and controlling patterns, do not block what Jesus wants to do. Jesus says "No" to the use of religion as a fix, an addiction, an abuse, a captivity or an oppression. We have a choice today: we can join a group that provides triage to people for forgiveness or healing; or we can join a group that is more like a religious terrorist cell, and put up obstacles and complaints. Choose.

Jesus clearly rewards the faith of the group that carries people to healing and forgiveness. We must use our power to serve, not to enslave. I believe that we need to go through some self-examination to determine that we are not like the scribes over in the corner resisting the group bringing a person to Jesus. If you can't carry yourself today, then lean into others who can. If you know someone who can't carry himself to Jesus, then form a team and carry that person to Jesus. If you are in a group and are looking for a ministry or mission, then find someone to carry to Jesus. Join a group in the church that provides ministry to carry people to Jesus. Be in a mission group outside that carries people to Jesus. Find a way to participate in bringing people to Jesus.

Many years ago, my wife and I were in a group that was learning how to lead small groups. It was made up mostly of Methodists—they were leaning into a Presbyterian to teach them about that. (God still works in miraculous ways.) As we began to describe what we were going to do in the group—we were going to study the Bible together, we were going to pray for each other, we were going to build relationships—we got to the point of describing our commitment to pray together out loud. One of the members of the group said, "There's no way I'm going to pray out loud in this group. It's not going to happen." We said, "That's okay. Would you mind if we prayed for you?" "That's fine," she replied. "Just don't push me to pray myself." And so for weeks we prayed together; we prayed for her and with her, but she did not pray. Finally, one day, she said, "You know, I've been in this group, and you have all shown me a gracious way to pray. I'd like to pray, if you don't mind." We said, "Sure." She offered a prayer that transformed the group. Afterwards she said, "Let me tell you the story of why I didn't want to pray: verbal prayers, prayers out loud, were used in my family of origin to precede times of beating. That was the only time we prayed out loud. So any time I prayed out loud, I identified it with punishment. This is the first group I've been in where I have learned that the grace of God can come through verbal prayers." That woman, today, is leading groups, teaching people how to pray out loud. She is carrying people to Jesus. She is leading groups of people who do not know how to come to Jesus.

Today, this is an opportunity to lean into your community of love, and let them bring you to Jesus. Today is an opportunity to put together a group of people and carry somebody else to Jesus. Today is an opportunity for us to realize that healing is deeply connected with forgiveness, and that Jesus wants to forgive us to the depths of our being, and make us whole.

Let us pray: Gracious God, in Jesus Christ you have shown us the way to forgiveness and healing. We ask now that you would lead us to have the courage to say "No" to obstacles and opposition, and to lead people into your presence, so that you may heal by the power of your grace. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.