

Raising The Roof
A Sermon by Richard Clewell
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Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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TEXT: Mark 2: 1-12

In one of our sister churches in this presbytery, a group of men have met on a designated day each week at 7:00 AM for over twenty years. They have breakfast and fellowship together, but, more importantly, they carry out a ministry of prayer. Every week each participant writes five letters of support to those who are sick or suffering in their congregation and the broader community. Over the years they have developed a network of relationships throughout this country which impact and bring about healing or transformation in the lives of so many. The letters, phone calls, and responses they continue to receive have impressed me with the realization that our own faith can make such a difference in the lives of others. Too often we underestimate the power of our faith when it is enacted on behalf of others.

Today in our Gospel text we find such faith expressed in a way that makes a significant difference. (Read Mark 2: 1-12, N.T. p.36). Jesus had been teaching and performing healings throughout the region of Galilee in response to the people's expressions of faith. When he returns to Capernaum, the site of his first healing event, his reputation precedes him, and with the report that he is back in town, the house where he is staying is inundated with people who want to see and hear him. There is standing room only, so close they hold each other up and all the doors are blocked off by the massive crowd. Some people show up carrying a paralyzed man to encounter Jesus but there is no way to get near him. Four of the disabled man's friends manage somehow to push their way through to the rear stairs to the roof carrying him up on his pallet. They are strangers to the homeowner but they believe so strongly that Jesus can make a difference, they tear off the thatch and dig a hole through the lath big enough to lower their pal in front of this one they trust and believe can transform life.

Mark declares that when Jesus observed the intensity and firmness of their faith, he said to the paralyzed individual, "Son, your sins are forgiven." This response probably startled the man's friends. They undoubtedly heard about his acts of healing and wanted this for their friend. Initially, they were probably disappointed in their hopes for restoration. Was their faith in vain?

In that day and age illness and suffering were associated with sin. Jesus' words to this man are understood as an expression of assurance that forgiveness comes from God. He reveals God's power in declaring forgiveness and then bringing healing as the exclamation point to divine love. Throughout Mark's gospel the miracles described always involve the pairing of forgiveness and healing, and the persons involved must overcome physical or social obstacles with the faith to believe in Christ's acceptance and power to forgive and transform lives.

These four friends acted on their faith that Jesus, the Son of Man, makes the difference in the course of life. They stand in stark contrast to the scribes who were present at this event. They didn't worry about the consequences of their determination to place their friend in Christ's presence. They tore up the roof of someone's home to accomplish what they felt needed to be done. Their faith was such that they risked misunderstanding or possibly a suit for damages. They overcame a massive human blockade and the probability of great criticism of their actions. Meanwhile the scribes, the perceived paragons of holiness, the categorizers of who are "righteous" and who are "sinners," who claim they know the conditions under which persons may expect to receive mercy from God, mistake Jesus' ministry to sinners as blasphemous disregard for God's holiness. Jesus perceives their judgmental thoughts; and focuses the real issue of his authority as the Son of Man. As proof of his

identity and power, he reinforces his capacity to forgive in the miraculous act of healing. All are amazed and glorify God.

What might we learn this morning from these four friends of the paralytic who initiated this healing encounter? First, they were willing to put themselves on the line for their friend. These four cared enough for him to risk going beyond what is socially acceptable and politically correct to get the assistance they believed would make the difference. They believed that Jesus could transform a humanly impossible situation and acted upon that faith. How ready are we to believe that the power of God can make a genuine difference in our lives and the lives of others? Would we be willing to risk social acceptance and security to care about others, particularly those who are considered different or outcast in conventional culture and society? Too often we make our Christian faith too individualistic, too private, and talk about our interior spiritual growth with little evidence of the Spirit's power in the way we live and behave. It seems so easy for us to forget that Christ is present in us to bring joy and hope also to whole communities of people – the exiles, the deported, the tortured, the discarded, the silenced.

I'm afraid that too often we are more like the scribes than these four friends. There is not much difference in attitudes in our day and age from those of Jesus' time. We also get trapped in false dichotomies which play to our own arrogance and sense of being better or even holier than others. For example, how do we look upon the homeless on the streets of Cleveland – should they just get out of our way and find a job? Is their state in life a consequence of their sin? Are people in the projects of the inner city judged to be sinfully lazy? Is the person trying to hold her or his life together on a less than minimum wage job somehow inferior and not motivated? Do children in run-down, poor quality schools deserve these conditions because they come from single parent homes and families plagued by chronic unemployment and lack of opportunity? Are individuals of the same sex who are committed to each other and their children of lesser standing and denied the rights of others as citizens because of human judgment that their life together is sinful? Does it bother us that over forty-three million fellow citizens have no health insurance as long as we have coverage? It seems we know what God calls us to do but we don't risk getting out of our own fears of rejection or misunderstanding by the culture where we find our comfort and pseudo-security. Do we really have a sense that we are forgiven and that all people need forgiveness, reconciliation and hope for fuller lives? If we did, perhaps our prayers would be more effective and our actions would be more directed by the Spirit in ways that make a difference.

Certainly, these four friends were called and compelled to do something which was contrary to prevailing mores and etiquette. They believed that Christ would utilize their faithful actions to bring new life and transformation. They could have sat back, said that there was nothing they could do in this situation, and told their friend that they were sorry. But they experienced divine grace and forgiveness; they desired the same for others. How do we feel about God's grace in forgiving us? Do we feel so compelled to become agents of reconciliation in bringing the Lord's transforming love to others? The late Henri Nouwen spoke to this when he observed, "Jesus' whole life was witness to his Father's love, and Jesus calls his followers to carry on that witness in his name. We, as followers of Jesus, are sent into this world to be visible signs of God's unconditional love. Thus, we are judged not first of all by what we say but by what we live - - - In a world torn apart by rivalry, anger and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds." Do you and I look upon our Christian vocation in this way?

The first century church was a community that initially lived this way in a self-centered and self-serving culture. They were known as Christians by their love. Predictably, as the church became more popular and was institutionalized as a religion, just like governments often do, it became more self-serving than servant to others, protected its own traditions, power, comfort and its status quo, and lost its vision of God's will for all people. This is the same situation we face as a community of faith

in our day as God continues to call us to make a difference in the world; “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” (Micah 6:8) We too must choose between on-going comfort or chancing expressing compassion or even risking confrontation on behalf of justice.

Finally, it seems to me that these friends’ faith gave them no other choice. That faith demanded action. A dynamic faith called and compelled them to move out of their comfort zone, away from their perceptions of safety and security. According to Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychologist and believer, “A Christian is like a person hanging from a trapeze bar. And that bar is what your security is truly invested in – though a Christian often consciously *believes* that his security is in Christ. But in my case, my *true* trust has most often been in things like social acceptance and my ability to earn a decent living. Most of my deepest concentration and time have been occupied in enhancing and protecting those things which constitute my real, though often unconscious, securities at any given time. And growth takes place when God swings another trapeze bar in view. The new trapeze might be a vocational challenge, a chance to be more honest in my work or to risk financial security in order to do his will. The “bar” coming toward me might be a sense of calling to lead a more disciplined life or help some oppressed people – and risk rejection. - - - There are two basic problems we face as we are confronted by a call to relinquish our present equilibrium and reach out. One difficulty is that the new challenge usually appears *at first* as a frightening *threat*. To grasp any new situation which will include our security base one must let go of the old, it seems. The new trapeze bar swings toward me just far enough from the present one that I cannot hang on with one hand and grab the new while still clinging to the old. So each new opportunity to grow carries with it a decision to surrender an old security as ultimate. But each new decision also represents a chance to place one’s trust more deeply in God’s hands through a very threatening leap of faith.”

Are we able to take such a leap of faith? The risk is always frightening, if a real security is at stake. Yet our growth as Christians and our calling on behalf of others requires such risk. If the love of Christ makes a difference in your life and mine, then do we not need to envision and share such transforming love with others? When we pray for others who suffer in various ways, do we genuinely believe that Christ can meet their need? When we observe injustice and situations which breed corruption and human misery, can we remain silent and helpless or do we believe that in union with Christ we have a responsibility to act in faith to bring about what God wants for the people of this earth? William Sloane Coffin put it well in his book, *Credo*, “The only security in life lies in embracing its insecurity. And faith in Jesus Christ, far from diminishing the risks, inspires the courage to take them on – all of them, including the risk of intellectual uncertainty.” The challenge is for us today the same as it was for the paralyzed man’s four friends. Are we ready to really trust that Christ can work through us? If so, it’s time for us as followers of Jesus Christ to really raise the roof.

Amen