

Healing Body & Soul

Dear Friends, good people of Westerly, brothers & sisters in Christ,

(1) Friends

Do you have friends? Good friends, faithful friends, friends that know you so well and care for you so much, that they might take action to support you when you are in trouble? Friends that will cook up a casserole and bring it to you when you are hurting? Friends, that may go shopping for you when you can't? Friends that might drive you to the doctor when you are not able to? Friends that listen to you when you need to share something important and you need an understanding set of ears that can hear and listen to your story?

I very much hope you do have good and loyal friends! Because the biblical story we get to reflect on today, is all about friends.

We hear that Jesus is back in town, it happens to be the same town we talked about last week: Capernaum. Last week I was told that a group from your congregation actually just visited Israel, the lake of Galilee and Capernaum just a few months ago! So, those of you who have been lucky to have been there: You can picture this scene vividly:

Jesus speaks to the people in a house and – since there are so many people that want to hear Jesus, the house was so full that no one was able to enter. A crowd had formed around the house.

Here is where the friends come in: We don't know their names, we don't know what they did for a living. We don't know how old they were. The only thing we know is that they had a friend, who was paralyzed. Maybe since birth.

Maybe through an accident, like falling of a roof. Or did he have a neurological disease, like Multiple Sclerosis, that paralyzed him?

In any case: his friends wanted to bring him before Jesus. They had heard of his power of healing. They wanted to give their friend a chance. But they can't get into the house! Too many people. So, they climb onto the roof. The roof was a flat roof, as the houses were made with flat roofs in those days. When carpenters built roofs, they first laid out some wooden planks as a foundation for the roof and then covered it with a mix of straw and clay that was packed firm.

Somehow, the four friends were able to pull their paralyzed friend up along with them – imagine the ingenuity and the tremendous effort they put in! They dug a hole into the roof. They must have used picks and shovels to break open the layer of clay and then they likely used a kind of axe to break through the wooden boards. They had to create a hole into the roof, big enough to fit their friend through!

I can't imagine Jesus and the other people inside the house didn't hear the noise of the hacking & breaking of the roof. The people underneath were probably covered in dust, dirt and wood-pieces due to the crumbling ceiling that was falling down on them when they saw this paralyzed man being lowered gently through the ceiling and placed at Jesus' feet.

Maybe the owner of the house flipped out! They were destroying his house! What if it rained tonight? Who was going to fix that roof again? If that house-owner lived in the US, he would have sued the paralytic's friends for invasion and destruction of property. And called the police!

We don't know how any of the on-lookers responded. I can't imagine the people who were lucky enough to get into the house, enjoyed VIP-seating, and eagerly listened to Jesus delivering some powerful teaching, were not annoyed! They were possibly having the time of their lives and were suddenly rudely interrupted. I picture them as not very welcoming towards the intruders.

But *these friends were determined!* They had a plan: they wanted their paralyzed friend to meet Jesus. And that is what they did! The determination of these friends is incredible! They did not stop until they achieved their goal! I would like to have friends like that!

And Jesus? Our story tells us that he “*saw their faith.*” It is not clear whether he saw the faith of the friends who did this incredible thing for their paralytic friend. Or if the story refers to the paralytic, who went along the whole plan, maybe even drove it? Likely they are all meant when the story talks about “*their*” faith. Because they put great faith in this encounter with Jesus, they were rewarded with the best possible outcome, the complete healing of their friend: Not only was he able to stand up, take his mat and go home, not only was he healed in body and able to walk. The issue Jesus addresses first, before the physical healing comes into play, is another kind of healing: Jesus says to the paralyzed man: “*Son, your sins are forgiven.*”

(2) *Your sins are forgiven*

I wonder what your response to this part of the text is? My response was: *What? What does this man's sin have to do with this?* Why is Jesus talking about sins when this story is so clearly about a physical struggle, about paralysis? I felt a little confused that Jesus changed the topic and went from physical ailment to behavior, to our inner struggles.

So why does Jesus bring sins into play here?

Jesus looks deeper than just the surface level He looks at the whole person, not just his body. In this perspective the paralytic man is not a paralytic, but a person, who suffers from physical paralysis. Jesus recognizes that he needed more than physical healing, a healing of body & soul, a wholistic healing, as we say in medicine today: Modern medicine is not only about healing the body of a person, the illness, but the whole human being with his or her physical needs, social needs, emotional needs and spiritual needs.

What is sin, dear friends? My favorite interpretation of sin is no focusing on our wrongdoings, our missteps, or failures. But to understand sin as losing our original alignment with God; losing the connection and orientation that God provides. When we lose that connection, we get disoriented, we may lose our moral compass and clarity. That is after all what Adam and Eve had in the original state they lived in in the Garden of Eden: A life of harmony and alignment with God, with each other and with themselves. In that original state there was no conflict, no shame, no pain – it is described as joyful carefree living. Until they got carried away by greed or seduction or a hunger for power – and they lose that original harmony with everything. When Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden, they begin to face toil and

sweat and pain – they experienced the world we are well familiar with and that we all live in.

The term “**Religion**” is likely derived from the Latin word re-ligare, which means “binding” or “tying back.” Faith is all about re-connecting us with God, with our fellow human beings and with our ourselves. Churches and worship services such as this one here today are about bringing us back into re-alignment with God and with God’s ways. In that perspective Jesus brings this man back into alignment with God, with himself and with his fellow human beings. That is what healing in body and soul refers to.

So when Jesus says to the paralyzed man: “*Your sins are forgiven!*” first, and then says: “*I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home!*” he offers wholistic healing to this man, a healing of body and soul. Jesus himself is in powerful connection with God and the power of God. This mighty deed is possible because of the power that flowed through Jesus and that set this man free, in body and soul. So, he got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all – and left the onlookers speechless.

(3) *My Mexican patient*

As you all know, I work in a large Hospital in Boston as a multi-faith chaplain. One of my patients was a Mexican immigrant Catholic man, who was 52 years old and who suffered from advanced and aggressive cancer. He knew that he did not have a long time left to live. He welcomed my visits and spoke to me with a soft and gentle voice: He said he knew he was going to die soon. And that he really did not want to die. And that he had many more plans for his life. He loved his life and his family. And, he would say, he did not understand why he had to

die, and why God was taking him so early. But, he said every time I saw him: *“I trust God! I know God has a plan for me and that God will not let me down. My life is in God’s hands and those are the good and caring hands of a dear friend, so I feel at peace.”*

This man did not waver in his faith once as long as I visited him over the course of several weeks. He wanted to be visited often, he asked for prayer every time I came and wanted the Eucharist as many times as possible. This man was not healed in body, he never recovered from his cancer. In fact, he died a few weeks after our first conversation. But he was remarkably peaceful. He was content and grateful for his life and his loved ones – and for his faith. In that way he became an inspiration for me and for many other people who knew him. I’m not sure I would be able to be so gracious and God-trusting if I were in his position. But he certainly is a model in faith I will never forget. Because if such patients in our hospital work we differentiate between physical and spiritual healing. This gentleman was not able to stand up, take his bed and walk out of the hospital. But to me it seemed like he was healed were it matters most: in his heart!

(4) *A massive heart-attack*

A 62 y/o male patient of mine told me the of a time when he went out to sea on his boat on a Sunday morning. When he returned home, and just after he had tied his boat back where it belonged, he had a massive heart-attack, stumbled onto the pier and collapsed. Luckily, or by God’s grace, another man saw him collapse, called 911 and was able to have him transported to the Miriam Hospital in Providence, where he received emergency surgery. The surgeon told him that had he come only 15 minutes later, it would have been too late for him to survive. This man spoke to me about a second chance he had been given, how he would

live differently now, and pondered about the kindness of the stranger, that had saved his life.

(5) *Being a friend*

Last week when we talked about the man who was possessed by an impure spirit, I asked you all: Where and when do you feel like you were not quite ourselves? Today I will ask you to identify with those beautiful, courageous friends: ***Where and when can you and I be a friend, a fierce, unafraid, creative and determined friend like those four*** were to the man who suffered from paralysis? Would we break conventions to help somebody who is ill and needs help? Would we dare to climb a house and open a roof if that is what was needed to help a friend? Would we invite a Ukrainian family into our house that has lost their home, loved ones and their country? Would we offer one of our kidneys to a patient who would die without a kidney-transplant? Would you drive a neighbor to a faraway clinic, if they couldn't drive themselves? A patient of mine needed medical care. But he lived in a socially underprivileged area of Boston and did not have the \$3,20 to pay for the bus to drive to the hospital. So, he walked. He walked for over three hours from his home to the hospital. When he arrived at the Emergency Department he had a pulse of over 200, and nearly died from exhaustion. Not one car stopped to ask him where he was going for the entire three hours! This man did NOT have the kind of friend that could have helped him...

An acquaintance of mine was so moved by the stories of Ukrainian war-refugees that he laid down his work for three months, flew to the border between Poland and the Ukraine, rented a large van and drove to the Ukrainian refugees, where Ukrainian refugees were pouring in by the hundreds every day. He offered to drive them to the train station, to bus-

stops, to shelters and government camps that registered them and gave them food and shelter. For three months he did this beautiful thing. Not all of us can afford to lay down our work for a few months, but this man was a true friend to all these victims of war.

I think this wonderful story wants to invite us to be creative, imaginative, generous and mischievous friends for each other! To not shy away from effort and exhaustion to be helpful to each other and think about how we can be truly helpful towards those in our world and in our community who are lonely, or helpless, or sad or isolated. This story reminds us that we have to do our part! If those friends hadn't done what they did, the paralyzed man would likely have stayed paralyzed. Taking initiative, being determined and coming up with a creative idea saved this man's life! God's love and kindness will be with us when we reach out to our community-members, church family-members and friends! May your supportive ideas be abundant and blessed with healing, inside and out!

Amen