

“Breaking Through the Barriers to Wholeness....Together”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Isaiah 58:6-9a; Luke 5:17-26

Imagine that it is a dark and stormy night. You are driving home in the rain and pass a bus stop where three people are waiting: an old woman who is clearly about to die, your best friend, who once saved your life, and the man or woman of your dreams. If you could pick up only one person, and could not come back again for the others, what would you do? Would you run off with your romantic dream on the theory that the dying woman had already lived a full life or wasn't your problem? Would you pick up your best friend because you owed him your life? Would you forego love and friendship in favor of helping the old woman? People have come up with all kinds of answers, as well as rationales for them, ever since this moral-ethical dilemma was first created by psychiatrists and ethicists years ago.¹

Personally, I have always thought that anyone who knew me well enough to be my best friend, or who was my perfect romantic match, would understand that I had to help the old woman (and there is nothing stopping me from getting Prince Charming's phone number in the process!). But according to Internet legend, when an employer used this hypothetical as a screening tool for job applicants, the one who got the job was the only applicant out of 200 who offered an original answer. He said that he would give his car keys to his best friend and ask him to take the old woman to the hospital, while he stayed and waited in the rain for the bus with the woman of his dreams.² You've got to admit that his answer showed some pretty creative problem solving. But I wonder if the ethics question were edited so that there was no direct personal benefit to the driver from picking up any of the people at the bus stop, how most people today would answer. Do you think that kind of scenario would inspire equally creative problem solving, or would it inspire more creative excuse-making?

It's worth thinking about because this is the situation at the beginning of today's lesson from *Luke*. A man is paralyzed and needs to get to Jesus in order to be healed. Jesus, at this point in his ministry, had developed quite a reputation as a healer. But the paralyzed man cannot get to Jesus on his own; he needs someone, or really multiple someones to pick him up. Luke doesn't say how many people decided to help the man, nor does Luke identify their relationship with him. None of the gospels do, actually, although all three of the Synoptic gospels record this story. So although the helpers could have been family members or friends, in the absence of such identifiers, which Luke had no problem using in other stories, we must entertain the possibility that the helpers could also have been people who just happened to hear the cries of the paralyzed man on their way through town, or saw him as they went about their business that day. Whoever they were, no sooner did they pick him up, than they had to decide how far they were willing to go to get him the help he needed because they could not carry him straight up to Jesus. The crowd surrounding the house where Jesus was blocked the way.

¹ I don't remember where I first heard this story, but a version of it is available in a sermon called "*The Kursk Syndrome*," posted Feb. 19, 2006, retrieved June 12, 2017 at <https://www.homilecticsonline.com/subscriber>.

² *Ibid.*

In Mark's Gospel, the crowd alone creates a barrier which presents the helpers with a dilemma of sorts. But in Luke's Gospel, the number of people near Jesus is only part of the problem. The other part is who they are and where they are. You see, Luke ups the ante in his version of the story by changing some of the little details in Mark's story in significant ways. For example, in Luke's version, the crowd at the house isn't made up of villagers; it is made up of Pharisees and interpreters of the law. In other words, they were Jewish law enforcement. Similarly the house where Jesus is staying is not just any old house. Mark suggests that it was a peasant's house when he says the helpers dug through the mud on the roof in his version. (See Mark 2:1-12). But in Luke's version, the house has a tile roof. Only the rich and powerful lived in places with tile roofs. So in Luke's moral dilemma, in order to help the paralyzed man meet Jesus, the helpers have to decide if they are willing to commit the crime of breaking and entering by destroying the fancy roof of the local McMansion, knowing that if they did manage to break through, it would be into the middle of the huge law enforcement convention taking place there. Yikes!

We know that the helpers decided to go for it, which is why in the end, Jesus healed the paralyzed man. Jesus was moved by their great faith. But would you have done what they did? I think the answer for most, if not all of us, would be probably, if the person was a family member or maybe a best friend desperately in need of help. But what if the disabled person was a stranger? Would it make any difference to you whether the man was paralyzed from birth, or because of an accident or illness caused by his own negligence? Would it make any difference if the posh house was owned by your boss? You see, the debate about access to health care which preoccupies our nation right now is nothing new. Luke drops us right into the middle of the First Century version of it!

In Luke's day, you couldn't talk about who deserved healing without the subject of sin coming into the conversation. The people in his day believed that physical and mental illnesses were caused either by demons or by someone sinning against God. If a person was born with a health problem, that "someone" was believed to be one of the person's parents, and if the person developed the problem later in life, then he or she was assumed to be the sinner. Either way, illness was seen as something which was caused by a separation from God, so it invited moral judgment and provoked shame.

I am sorry to say that even though 2000 years have passed, and even though we now know that illnesses and disabilities are caused by viruses, bacteria, genetic anomalies, and accidents more than anything else, there are still people who share the ancient view that it is appropriate to cast moral judgments upon sick people. You may have heard the other day, that a certain senator from Alabama, when interviewed about proposed changes to our nation's insurance laws, drew a distinction between healthy people who live "good lives," and sick people. He implied that sickness was a moral failing, and that whether a person was to blame for his or her health problem should be a part of the cost benefit analysis of insurance policymaking. Specifically, he did not think that good healthy people should have to shoulder the high systemic costs which come from

having a health care system which treats “bad” sick people. He thought the sick should be responsible for finding and financing their healing themselves.³

Our denomination strongly objects to this view, and you can see why by looking at how Jesus responded in today’s text, to a situation in which good, healthy people did physically, and potentially economically, shoulder the burden of enabling a disabled person to find greater health and wholeness. Jesus did not tell them they were wasting their time. He did not condemn them for associating with a sinful, disabled person, or condemn the paralytic for causing his own disability. Jesus did not even yell at them for breaking his host’s roof. Instead, as I already mentioned, his first words were to praise the faithfulness of the helpers who had gone to such lengths, including risking their economic, legal, and social standing in the community, in order to bring the paralyzed man to a place of healing. Then his second words were directed at the elephant in the room: the sin issue. Although Luke set us up to expect Jesus to say to the man, “You are healed, take up your mat and walk,” instead Jesus surprised everyone by telling the man that his sins were forgiven.

We don’t know if Jesus said this because he thought that the man had done something to make himself paralyzed. But from what we know from other healing stories, especially those in the *Gospel of John*, it seems pretty clear that Jesus did not buy into the whole illness as divine punishment for sin theory of the day. It is far more likely, therefore, that Jesus addressed the man the way he did because he knew that the perceived sinfulness of the man was an obstacle to his healing. So by rejecting the idea that the man was being punished or condemned by God, Jesus used his authority and power to remove the grounds for the community’s moral judgment. In so doing, he equipped the man to see himself differently as well, which enabled him to begin to find greater wholeness even before his legs were healed.

Doctors at John’s Hopkins, the Mayo Clinic, and other well regarded hospitals around the country have recognized for some time now that when it comes to healing, forgiveness can be as powerful as any lab-developed medicine. “There is an enormous physical burden to being hurt and disappointed,” Dr. Karen Swartz of Johns Hopkins says. There is also an enormous physical burden to feeling guilty or ashamed. “Thus studies have shown that forgiveness can lower the risk of heart attack, improve cholesterol levels and sleep, reduce pain, blood pressure, anxiety, depression and stress.”⁴ But forgiveness helps with more than physical illness; it also helps with emotional brokenness. Alcoholics Anonymous recognizes this, which is why the organization includes seeking and giving forgiveness as one of its twelve sets to recovery. Guilt and shame as well as judgment and condemnation can be emotionally paralyzing. Remove them, and you can change a person in body, mind, and soul.

³ See e.g. Chait, Jonathan, “*Republican Blurts Out That Sick People Don’t Deserve Affordable Care*,” NEW YORK MAGAZINE, May 1, 2017, retrieved June 13, 2017 from <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/05/republican-sick-people-don’t-deserve-affordable-care.html>.

⁴ “*Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It*,” JOHNS HOPKINS MEDICINE Healthy Connections, retrieved June 13, 2017 from http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/healthy_aging/healthy_connections/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it

I do not know whether the man on the pallet in *Luke* was physically, emotionally, or spiritually paralyzed—maybe all three. It doesn't really matter; you can take the story in any of those ways, depending upon your comfort level in accepting the healing miracle stories of the New Testament. What matters is that we recognize that after the helpers removed the physical barriers to healing for the man, Jesus removed the remaining emotional and spiritual barriers by taking away the blame which kept him equally trapped. Jesus offered him God's love and grace instead of judgment, and that made all the difference.

Jesus' words were exactly what the man needed to hear. But not everyone in the crowd was equally happy to hear them. Remember, Jesus was surrounded by lawyers that day. They hadn't said anything about the roof at least not that was recorded in the Gospels. They hadn't objected to the healing on the grounds that the man had a pre-existent condition which precluded him from receiving health care. But they couldn't contain themselves when Jesus started talking as if he were God. "Only God can forgive sins," they murmured. "You are committing blasphemy!"

"Oh good grief," Jesus probably wanted to say. "You just saw a man set free from condemnation and all you can do is question my authority to forgive? You're only upset because you want to see me fail so that you can preserve the status quo. If I had said, 'Get up and walk,' and the man had remained on his mat, you could have discredited me and my teachings. But so that you will know that I do have the authority to forgive, I will show you that I have the power to heal too." "Get up and walk," Jesus said, and the man did. In so doing, Jesus demonstrated both the healing power of forgiveness, and that he had the authority of God.

If God were to use this story as a hypothetical to test who is best suited for Christian discipleship, if God were to ask us who we most closely resonate with in the story, the helpers, Jesus, or the lawyers, I think even before we answer we all can see that God would hope that our answer would be one of the first two. God wants us to be like the helpers, carrying those in need so that they can get help. God wants us to follow the example of Christ, offering forgiveness and understanding, not judgment and condemnation. This is what God conveyed through Isaiah centuries before embodying the lesson in Christ: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly...Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am.'" Third Isaiah spoke these words to a people that had forgotten how to live together as God's community. They had become so preoccupied with their own individual needs in exile that they did not care for one another anymore. They were so quick to point the finger and blame one another that they did not see that when they ignored those in need, they were hurting themselves in the long run.

Dorothy Day once said, “We reach out to help others as a statement of our own need for help. We are all beggars and sinners. We are all in more jeopardy than we dare acknowledge.”⁵ She was right. So if your first instinct when hearing the paralytic’s story was to resonate with the unidentified homeowner, whose beautiful roof was sacrificed to help a man who may have caused his own problems, or with the Pharisees, who were only trying to enforce the law, then I encourage you to read the story again. But this time, instead of asking yourself what you would do if you encountered a paralyzed man who needed you to pick him up, think about what you would wish for from others if you were the paralyzed man, because at some point in our lives we will probably be that man, just as we all will be the person who is dying, the best friend, and God-willing, the person of someone’s dreams from the first scenario. We all need help from others at some point in our lives. We need to be carried when we are too poor or weak or scared or ashamed to move forward. We need to be forgiven and need to be loved. Therefore there is no scenario when someone of God’s children needs help, when we do not have a vested interest in helping them. So let’s get creative, not in making excuses, but in breaking through the barriers that keep us all from being whole. Amen.

⁵ As quoted in *Animating Illustrations*, “help,” HOMILECTICS ONLINE, retrieved June 12, 2017 from <https://www.homilecticsonline.com/subscriber>