

Narrative Lectionary- Jesus Heals and Teaches

January 12, 2020

At the end of J.R.R. Tolkien's book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo, who is on a mission to destroy the ring, is trying to leave a battle to go to the land of Mordor alone. He feels like he needs to accomplish this mission alone. And his best friend Sam, his best friend in all of Middle Earth, swims after Frodo's boat. He won't let him go alone.

After Sam talks Frodo into taking him with him, Frodo says, "It's no good trying to escape you. But I'm glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along! It is plain that we were meant to go together." We have story today about some friends who love another friend so deeply that they have to find a way to get him to Jesus so he can be healed.

Their friend was a paralytic, someone who couldn't walk. We don't know how long he'd been this way; we don't know how it happened. But we do know that for him to get anywhere, he had to be carried around on a stretcher, on a mat.

Some of you know what it's like to be hampered in your mobility. You know what it's like to have a physical challenge. I like to say we all have challenges; it's just that some are more visible than others.

So this man in the gospel cannot walk. I wonder what his life was like. In that day, he had probably lost his job, if he ever had one. If he had a wife and children, they were suffering from his ailment. He may have felt like a failure because he couldn't provide for his family. He couldn't play with his kids the way he wanted to. He couldn't walk around the village with his wife.

Maybe he had been to Israel's version of the Mayo Clinic; he'd tried acupuncture and everything he saw advertised on TV. He had prayed his heart out for healing. And he probably felt guilty, because in Jesus's day, if you were sick, then you had done something wrong. You were receiving God's punishment, because you or your parents had sinned. So he probably spent day and night confessing his sins, trying to figure out which one it was that had caused this ailment.

What we know for sure about him is that he had friends. The man is blessed with friends who love him and care about his life. They are a “fellowship of the mat” that wants to connect their friend with whatever Jesus can do.

They decided that because they loved their friend, and they trusted Jesus, they needed to bring the two together. They loved their friend, and they trusted Jesus, and they wanted to bring the two together to see what Jesus would do. Let me say something about what it means to be a friend. Being somebody’s friend means letting them see your vulnerabilities. You know, when you are carrying somebody on a mat, you see them in a fairly vulnerable condition. It’s hard to put a good face on it and pretend everything’s ok. To let yourself be carried by your friends is to let them see you at your weakest. When Bishop Laurie and her staff visited our church, each of those staff people shared from their vulnerability. Bishop Laurie started off by saying, I got the mammogram report back, and it wasn’t good. Assistant to the Bishop Melissa talked about an eating disorder she struggled with in her 20s.

And then the bishop said, Find somebody around your table you don’t know very well, and share a challenge in your life. And I found myself with a Christian brother from Our Savior’s Lutheran in Lake Oswego, both of us sharing about a challenge. And my goodness, it brought us together in a hurry. We weren’t sharing from our strengths- oh, look at me- look at my successes- we were sharing from our vulnerabilities. And in our challenges and vulnerabilities, we care for each other. When Paul writes his letters, and he says *you*, he almost always is speaking in the second person plural, in other words, *you all*. He is speaking to the community, not individuals.

Somebody has done a study of the phrase “one another” in the New Testament. We are to love one another, pray for one another, serve one another, carry one another’s burdens, encourage one another, rejoice with one another, weep with one another, live in harmony with one another. We are in relationship with each other, and I would also say, we need to “one another” all of creation, because we are in relationship with all of creation as well.

The paralytic in this story makes himself vulnerable to his friends by allowing them to carry him. Who are the mat carriers for you? How can we “one another” each other better in this congregation?

These friends, who had a deep love for their friend, said to him one day, Hey, we’ve heard about this man Jesus. He’s doing some amazing things. Let’s go see him. We’ll pick you up tomorrow at 9:30 (and they really meant, we’ll pick you up!) So they pick him up in the morning, and they carry him to the house where Jesus is staying, and they see a line going out the front door. And one of them says, Looks like the show is sold out. Let’s go home. And somebody else says, No, let’s hang around. He’s been known to hurry off all of sudden and go pray somewhere, so let’s catch him when he leaves the house.

And a third guy says, Hey, there’s a staircase up the back- let’s get up on the roof. So they haul their friend up on the flat roof, that was made from poles and branches and mud, and they start pulling off between the poles. There is dried mud coming down into the room below. And one of the neighbors says, Oh, I guess they’re finally putting in that skylight they’ve been talking about. And the owner says: Is this covered under my homeowner’s policy? Can I claim an act of God?

And the guys are thinking, I sure hope Jesus heals our friend, cuz we sure don’t want to pull him back up again!

They let down the mat with their friend on it and place it at Jesus’ feet. And I love the next five words....When Jesus saw their faith...Jesus saw these four friends with their sweaty, hopeful faces, and he literally saw their faith. Their faith made them tear open a roof to get their friend to Jesus. This was perseverance. Notice it’s not the paralytic’s faith. It’s the faith of the friends. Jesus honors that faith. Jesus says, I can work with that.

And what does Jesus do? Does he take care of the physical ailment right away? No, he says, Son, you’ve got a deeper problem that needs taking care of. You have a relationship with God that is broken. Your sins are forgiven.

Honestly, I think the man might have been relieved when he heard that. Because in Jesus’ day there was an association between illness and sin. People believed that if you had an illness, you were being punished for something. Sin led to sickness.

So the man had thought for years, What did I do to deserve this? And people probably passed him lying on the mat, and whispered, What did he or his parents do to deserve this? Jesus, by the way, disagrees with that theology in Luke 13- He says people who died when a tower fell weren't any worse sinners than anybody else.

But in case this man thinks his sins have led him here, Jesus says, Your sins are forgiven. But the religious people in the crowd start to grumble in their minds, Hey, forgiving sins is God's business. What's this nobody rabbi doing thinking he can forgive sins?

Jesus knows what they're thinking, and he says, Why are you asking that question? Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, Stand up and walk? Neither one is easy. Both are a God-thing. So he says, Just to show you that I have the power to forgive sins, I'll have him walk as well. And Jesus says to the paralytic, Stand, take up your mat and go home. Go home to your wife and take a walk around the village. Go home and wrestle with your kids.

I wonder what it means that the mat is mentioned four times in this story. Take up your mat and go home. He has a new relationship with the mat now. He's carrying the mat, it's not carrying him! He has been set free from the mat. It no longer defines who he is. So whether or not God heals us of whatever infirmity we have, we don't have to be defined by that infirmity. We don't have to be defined by the mat, whatever that is for you. We don't have to be defined by our physical challenge, or whatever emotional wounds we have from the past, or by anything in our history. That's not who we are.

God says, Pick up your mat, whatever that is, and walk with it. I'm putting you into a new relationship with the challenges of your life. God says, I don't want you to continue to lie on that mat of your history or your challenges; I want you to hold it up to me so I can work through it.

What if we are the friends in the story? Where do we need to persevere in somebody else's life? Are we tearing open the roof in prayer for somebody? Remember that we can place ourselves anywhere in the story. Maybe we are the man being lowered into Jesus' presence needing God's healing today. Maybe we are being persistent for the sake of a friend or family member. Maybe we're the

scribes in the story, thinking, We like things the way they are. Why is this man Jesus trying to change things?

But our reading doesn't end here. Jesus is walking along the sea, and he sees Levi, a tax collector, sitting at his booth. Capernaum was at the edge of two different territories, and there would have been a customs booth here. Nobody liked tax collectors, because they were raising money for an occupying power. The merchants had to pull over, and open their suitcases, and declare what they were bringing in, and Levi would charge them what they owed, and more for himself. He was the one who lived in the better home, and rode a nicer donkey, because he cheated people.

So you can imagine the people in the crowd seeing Jesus call this cheat to be a disciple, and they say, Jesus, don't you know who this guy is? You don't want him hanging around your organization. What will people think? This guy doesn't teach Sabbath School- he doesn't give to the poor, he cheats everybody. Your reputation is going to take a hit, Jesus. But Jesus singles out the man who needs a change in direction.

And then he goes to Levi's house, and he has dinner with him and his friends. In Jesus' day, you were judged by the company you kept. You ate with people who shared your values, your lifestyle, your world view, your morals. I'm afraid not much has changed. We still tend to hang around with folks like us. It's more comfortable.

Well, Jesus doesn't worry about his reputation. And when the religious people ask, Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? Isn't he just endorsing their lifestyle? He says, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners.

What he is saying is, I'm spending time with people who know they need me. I'm a doctor spending time with people who know they are spiritually sick. I won't hang around with people who don't realize they need help.

This reading closes out with people saying, Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but you and your disciples don't? The Pharisees used to fast on Monday and Thursday. It had probably just become a meaningless,

religious habit. So people ask, Why are they fasting but you and your followers aren't? Jesus says, You don't fast when there is a wedding going on. I'm the bridegroom, and the kingdom of God is a party. One of these days I will be taken away, but until there is a celebration going on.

Something new is happening. The kingdom of God is coming near! And then he uses a couple of examples. He says, Nobody sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; when you wash it, the new piece shrinks, and pulls that old garment, and there's a worse tear. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins, because when the new wine ferments and expands, that old skin will burst. Jesus says, With me here among you, we have some new wine, and those old skins aren't working anymore. We need some new wineskins.

These days, there are new churches trying things in some new ways. I have colleagues who start worship with a one-to-one conversation with someone else in the living room. You can talk about your vulnerabilities. You discover the hurts in the room. The sermon is an interactive Bible study. I know some churches that don't sing at all. They use poetry or art though. Those are new wineskins.

Notice Jesus doesn't say the old is bad. He says, It's challenging to mix them. One possibility that came up in the Bible study on Wednesday is to put old wine into new skins. Let's find ways to use the things that we treasure, things that have stood the test of time, but use them in new ways. Former bishop Dave Brauer-Rieke did that Wednesday night. He took the mark of Cain story from Genesis 4 and recited a poem about that story. Old wine, in a new wineskin. Jesus says, you gotta keep it fresh. What does that mean for us? We're prayerfully working on that. How do we as a community reach out to our neighborhoods with some fresh ideas, some new wine, in new wineskins? Maybe it'll be the old wine in some new skins. Please be praying about that in this new year. Amen.