

Carrying the Paralyzed to Jesus
Mark 2:1-12

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Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Mk. 2:3

The plot of this story from the Gospel According to Mark is easy to follow. There was a paralyzed man who was unable to walk. Four of his friends picked up his bed, each taking a corner, and carried him to the house where Jesus was, hoping that Jesus would help him. When they arrived at the house where Jesus was they found that the house was so crowded with people they could not get in the front door. They developed the ingenious plan of carrying the paralyzed man on his bed up to the roof of the house where they removed some tiles and then lowered the bed and the man down into the center of the house where Jesus was. When Jesus saw the faith and loyalty of these friends, he was amazed and he healed the paralyzed man straightaway.

Now one line of thought we can draw from this story is this. The ministry of the church and of every Christian is to befriend the paralyzed and carry them to Jesus, where they can find help, healing, and hope.

Working along that line of thought this morning has us ask and answer three questions. Who are the paralyzed today? What paralyzes people today? How can we carry the paralyzed to Jesus?

Who are the paralyzed today?

When I speak of the paralyzed, I am not thinking of those with some kind of physical paralysis. I am referring to people with a spiritual paralysis.

I have known physically paralyzed people who had a life of fullness marked by joy and service in spite of their disability. By way of example, I will tell you about three Harolds, two of whom I knew personally and the other I saw in public and knew by reputation.

The first Harold is Harold Schmitt. Harold Schmitt lived across the street from us when we lived in town after we moved from the farm. Harold was not paralyzed but his legs were weak for some reason the cause of which I was never sure. He spent most of his waking hours on the couch in his living room and he got about his house on a homemade tricycle with a platform on which he could sit and propel backward with his feet. Harold Schmitt's legs were weak, but his mind was sharp and his spirit was cheerful. He showed how an infirmity could be borne and he taught how life could be lived with interest and creativity and delight.

The second Harold is Harold Ott. Harold Ott was a pastor I came to know in Bensenville when I was on my intern year of seminary and working as a chaplain at the Bensenville Home Society near Chicago. Harold and his wife lived with their grown daughter in one of the bungalows on the Bensenville Home Society campus. Harold Ott was a quadriplegic. A car

accident several years prior to the time I met him. The wreck put him in a massive circular bed that worked so he could be on his back some of the time and on his stomach some of the time; it even had a hoist as part of it that could lift him into a wheelchair. I was sent to minister to Harold pastorally, but he ministered to me and indirectly taught me a seminary class in pastoral visitation. His encouragement helped me learn how to approach the vulnerable and appreciate people for what they can do rather than see them for what they cannot do.

The third Harold is Harold Wilke. I did not know him personally but I saw him at public events where he was a featured speaker and panelist. Harold Wilke was a United Church of Christ minister. He was not paralyzed, but he was born without arms. But my! What that man could do with his feet was amazing! He could write, he could dine, he could use a telephone; he had no arms, but the amount of work that man embraced was something to see.

So the paralysis I am speaking about this morning is not literal and physical. It is spiritual. It is to be without what my three Harolds had. It is to be without what John Baillie called in one of his prayers “a cheerful and buoyant spirit, and peace in doing [God’s] will.”¹

What paralyzes people today?

What is it that keeps people from having cheerfulness and buoyancy of spirit, and peace in their lives? I will draw out four factors that are the cause of paralysis today. Perhaps you can think of more.

Forces of evil that strip people of opportunity and trust contribute to spiritual paralysis. Here at the start of Black History Month we can draw our illustration from African American current events and history. Currently, as I am sure you have been hearing on the news, African Americans tend to be hesitant with regard to taking the Coronavirus vaccine. Why is that? Part of the answer goes back to 1932 and a 40 year study of syphilis. The study was conducted by the U.S. Department of Public Health in conjunction with the Tuskegee Institute of Alabama. Six hundred Black men were recruited and volunteered to participate in the study. Sadly, the men were not given all the facts involved, at least not enough so their participation could be based on truly informed consent. Worse, the men were not offered subsequently sufficient and appropriate medical care, and the disease was allowed to take its toll.² The unfair and unethical advantage taken of these men, supposedly for the sake of science, has understandably left a bad taste and a high level of mistrust on the part of African Americans when it comes to the medical field. So that is the first cause of spiritual paralysis I mention today: forces of evil strip people of opportunity and trust, and that keeps them from having cheerfulness, buoyancy, and peace.

False ideas of Christianity paralyze people, too. A couple of weeks ago I quoted in a sermon from the diary of James Gilmour. Gilmour was a Scottish missionary to China in the 1800s. Gilmour went to China excited with hope and thrilled at the possibilities that awaited him there. But he penned in his diary one day, “I have not . . . seen anyone who even *wanted* to be Christian.”³

¹ John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), p.121.

² Center for Disease Control, “U.S. Public Health Service Study at Tuskegee,” www.cdc.gov. Accessed January 31, 2021.

³ John Henry Jowett, *The School of Calvary* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1910), p. 55-56. Emphasis in the original.

Some of the signs that were on display at the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol used the language and symbols of Christianity. Some of the folks even prayed aloud in the name of God. After seeing their behavior I was left wondering why anyone not a Christian would want to become one. I believe it was Nietzsche who said, “Christians must show me they are redeemed before I will believe in their Redeemer.”⁴ If Christianity is something that breaks the windows of an iconic building, beats people with flagpoles, and erects gallows, what is there to believe? Why would anyone admire Christianity enough to want to become Christian? So a second factor that can lead to spiritual paralysis is a false idea of Christianity. False ideas of what Christianity is paralyze people from approaching Christ.

Faulty ideas of what makes for the good life also paralyze people spiritually today. In the Old Testament there are two brothers. Jacob and Esau are their names. Esau is the one who has the cherished birthright. Jacob wants it desperately. There came a day when Esau returned home from a hunting expedition or some such thing and he was hungry. He was famished. Jacob had some lentil soup on the stove. Esau asked for a bowl. Jacob put a price on it. “I will sell it to you for the birthright,” he said. Esau agreed to the bargain. What is a birthright to a hungry man? He fed his immediate need and it cost him the lasting blessing.

Today there are people who are selling their souls, trying to reach the good life. But they are not getting the good life they want. All they are getting is a bowl of lentil soup. They think power will get them the good life, so they are selling their souls for power. Or they think wealth will get them the good life and they are doing all they can to get richer. Or they strive for public acclaim thinking that will be the key that unlocks the door. But none of these are sure-fire paths to a cheerful, buoyant spirit that has peace and a solid foundation. They are just as easily highways to disgrace. Faulty ideas of the good life, together with false ideas of Christianity and forces of evil, paralyze people today.

A fourth factor that contributes to spiritual paralysis comes into play when people have flawed views of themselves. Our Adult Sunday School class, under Sarah Pundt’s leadership, is currently thinking of the life, work, and example of Mr. Rogers. As almost all of you know, I am sure, Mr. Rogers is famous for saying, “I like you just the way you are.” Unfortunately, the world is full of people who do not like themselves just the way they are. They are kept – paralyzed – from seeing they have intrinsic value of the highest measure. They somehow think they have to prove themselves in order to be worthy of love – they think they have to work harder than others, or be funnier, or be thinner, or look more youthful.

So these four factors are among those that paralyze people today and keep them from lives of cheerfulness, buoyancy of spirit, and peace: forces of evil that strip them of opportunity and trust, false ideas of Christianity, faulty ideas of what makes for the good life, and flawed ideas of themselves.

How can we carry paralyzed people to Jesus today?

If the mission of the church and of every Christian is to befriend the paralyzed and carry them to Jesus where they can find healing, help, and hope, how can we go about that work?

⁴ James S. Stewart, *Walking with God*, ed. by Gordon Grant (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1996), p. 126.

We can begin to carry people to Jesus only by loving the paralyzed enough to want to help them. Both the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story saw in the ditch that man who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead. But only the Samaritan cared enough about him to bind his wounds and to carry him to safety. We will not get far in the mission of carrying the paralyzed if we do not first look upon them with compassion. We have to love them enough to want to help.

We can begin to carry people to Jesus only by believing in Jesus enough to see he is worth getting to in the first place. That, in addition to the love they had for their paralyzed friend, is what these four had who carried the paralyzed man to Jesus. They did not understand everything about Jesus, but they saw he was worth getting to. So we will not get far in our mission of faithfully carrying the paralyzed to Jesus until we see that Jesus has something to offer that is found nowhere else and in no one else. In short, we have to believe our own gospel.

Further, we can begin to carry people to Jesus only by being unashamed to say something about Jesus. Janet Dahl organized our youth to come together for a reading of the 23rd Psalm that was part of this worship service earlier. I like that because it was beginning to help the youth learn and practice the art of witnessing. They were reading scripture, to be sure, but that scripture was putting something on their lips. "The Lord is *my* shepherd. He leads *me*." They were doing more than reading scripture; they were saying something about God in relation to themselves. That is witnessing.

Chances are there will be a lot of paralyzed people in those soon to be built apartments in the church's near neighborhood. There will be those without a spirit of cheerfulness, buoyancy, and peace. If we are going to carry them to Jesus we will have to witness to them in some way that does more than say there is a church over here. We will have to tell them about the gospel that can be heard here and the love that can be found here, all through Jesus.

Once more, we can begin to carry people to Jesus by using every tool at our disposal. Those tools include worship, prayer, word, music, social media, the Internet, email, the USPS, and whatever else comes along that could prove useful. Back in the 16th Century that monk Martin Luther took advantage of the new technology of the printing press when he wanted to spread the ideas and ideals of the Protestant Reformation. Those who will carry people to Jesus today will likewise use the best technology that is at hand.

Looking back we began by thinking of a plot that occurred in Mark, in the story of a paralyzed man carried by some of his friends to Jesus who became amazed at what he saw and cured the man of his paralysis.

We end by imaging a plot that can occur here. There are people now stopped from having a cheerful, buoyant spirit full of peace. We can carry them to Jesus who will bring them hope, help, and healing. The faith we place in Jesus will delight the Lord and it will bring help to the hurting.