Sermon 2-17-19

Paul Purdue preaching

Awake!

Did they slide the mat down under him so he could sit up as if sitting in a swing? Or did the four friends let him down to Jesus flat on his back? It would make a difference in the size of the hole the five friends opened in the roof.

Mark 2 tells us they dug through the plaster of the sun-baked, mud brick roof. Luke’s writing to the Gentiles living in the Romanesque homes tells us the friends removed roofing tiles. Roman cities featured homes with clay fired tiles, similar to terracotta roofing. Some expensive temples and villas featured marble or even bronze roofing tiles. Whether they dug into the plaster or pulled off terracotta tiles, this is an outrageous act of love. These five friends are awake, standing firm in faith, courageous, strong, and doing something risky for love. (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).  Are we these kinds of friends?

The five friends heard of Jesus’ healing and knew they needed to do something. So four of the friends carry their friend to Jesus. Luke mentions cities as widespread as Capernaum to Jerusalem, so perhaps people came from over 100 miles to be healed. How far did the four friends carry their friend? How much did he weigh? Did they use the firefighters carry or take turns hauling a drag sled? Could they not afford a chariot? What did the the five friends chat about on their journey to Jesus...hopes of walking home together?

Who do we carry to Jesus? Who do we help find a path to healing, faith, hope, love, worship, and wholeness?  Whose life or health concerns have become our own? Whose suffering costs us time and energy? Do we love our neighbors enough to bring them to the doctor or carry them to Christ? Are we engaged in any outrageous acts of love?

The man-on-the-mat was not helpless. Whenever we make strong, courageous, and loving friends we hold a power beyond our physical limitations. Presence brings healing.

When they arrive at  the makeshift clinic, the line spills out the door stretching into the street. People had come from every village in Galilee and as far away as Jerusalem. Many suffered like the woman in Luke 8, who endured a 12 year flow and spent all she had on physicians. The five friends wanted to draw close to Jesus, but the line said no. Do you think they considered  going back home, carrying the cot on another disappointing adventure? Who do you think suggested removing the roof tiles? Did they argue about the merits of line jumping or breaking and entering? Have you seen “we will do anything” desperation in another’s eyes? Are we engaged in any outrageous acts of love on behalf of others?

When did the crowd inside the clinic notice? Did they hear voices and footsteps on the roof? Did they look up as the five friends began to dig or pry loose tiles? Was it when plaster and dust drifted down or not until a stream of sunlight broke into the room? Why did Jesus let this parable unfold, knowing somebody would need to repair the roof? Why did the homeowner fail to rush outside and stop them from tearing up her roof? Maybe, she saw the joyous twinkle dancing in Jesus’ eyes, and felt “let’s wait, something amazing is about to happen!”

“They lowered him—cot and all—through the roof tiles into the crowded room in front of Jesus.” Outrageous! Sometimes we simply must do something. Is it right to remove some unsuspecting homeowner’s ceiling tiles?  Should we cut the clinic’s line? Why not ring the doorbell and ask, “Do you mind if we dig a six foot hole in your roof?” Are we engaged in any outrageous acts of love or do we sit around waiting and hoping someone does something?

The church is forever playing it safe. We fear change. We loath risk. We crucify prophets. We love old wine.  We are mortified if someone suggests modifying our comfort zone, with a walk up Communion bar window right off 21st Avenue? Lamenting the church’s slow response to Hitler’s rise in Germany, a “millennial” pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “it is no good waiting indefinitely for a sign from heaven that will solve our problems… to procrastinate and prevaricate simply because you’re afraid of erring… seems to me almost to run counter to love. To delay or fail to make a decision may be more sinful than to make wrong decisions out of faith and love.” (Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, Spy) Do we play it sinfully safe or take loving risks in order to bring people to Jesus? Are we engaged in any outrageous acts of faith, hope or love?

I think Jesus’ gentle laughter lit up the room with compassion as Luke’s reports,“When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus commends this outrageous act of love. They cut a hole in the roof without permission! Could Jesus wants us to take a few more risks?

Jesus offers a curious declaration, “Friend, your sins are forgiven” because the man-on-the-mat did not ask for forgiveness. And Jesus does not just see his individual or our personal faith. Jesus rewards communal faith in action. Jesus sees “‘their” combined faith and offers forgiveness. It’s a pretty good argument for infant baptism and communal responsibility! This common faith will lead to a lot of joy, for soon enough the man-on-the-mat will stand up, roll up his cot, and walk home praising God. And all the people will be beside themselves with wonder. Filled with awe, and glorifying God, saying, “We’ve seen unimaginable things today.”

But not everyone finds joy or sees with eyes of faith. Let’s not use the term Pharisee; let’s translate it from Greek to English and use the term “the Separate Ones”. The Separate Ones and the Bible experts were sitting nearby. Darren Wright pointed out the contrast of four friends carrying someone to Jesus, removing tiles and lowering a cot down to Jesus, while the legalist sat by keeping a watchful, judging eye. Jesus is healing, the crowds are waiting, the friends are straining, the man-on-the-mat is praying, and the religious folks are sitting, waiting, watching and judging. **This morning, what are you doing: sitting, judging, praying,  carrying, healing …** It is easy to sit and watch... and tweet. You can spend your life watching from the critic’s chair, taking the safest route, keeping a watchful eye for others’ theological slip ups, and never bring anyone closer to the Kingdom of God.

The Separate Ones begin to mutter on social media, “Who is this who insults God? Only God alone can forgive sins.” Why do they think God is insulted? How is God insulted by expansive grace? These issues hinge on our understanding of God! Do we see grace as the agent of our healing and wholeness, or do we think it is by our efforts and merit that we are saved from sin and born into new life? Is our God so small that God needs protecting from sinners like us? Do we believe “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God”, or do we think we earn must divine acceptance, forgiveness, and love?

Well to be fair, the ancient Bible thumpers had the law on their side! In fact, that is why they are muttering against Jesus; they knew the rules from Leviticus, “No one who has an imperfection will be allowed to preside at the Lord’s Table: this includes anyone who is blind, crippled, disfigured, deformed; anyone who has a broken foot or hand; hunchback, too small, eye disease, rash, scabs, crushed testicle, or any woman! Such folks can take Communion sure, but shall not officiate… for if they do they make the sanctuary impure” Leviticus 21:18-23. If we think any persons’ make up makes the sanctuary impure or the altar table less than holy, then friends, our God is too small.  Such diminished theology is not Wesleyan or orthodox. We are saved by Divine grace, not works, so that no one can boast!

Do we believe the old Gospel meeting hymn?

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt,

yonder on Calvary's mount out-poured, there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Grace, grace, God's grace-- grace that will pardon and cleanse within;

grace, grace, God's grace--  grace that is greater than all our sin.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,freely bestowed on all who believe;

you that are longing to see his face,will you this moment his grace receive?

Grace, grace, God's grace-- grace that will pardon and cleanse within;

grace, grace, God's grace--  grace that is greater than all our sin.

Do we believe that old evangelical hymn or is our God too small? Will we be people who tell of the marvelous matchless grace of our loving Lord?  Do we believe it is freely given to all who believe? How could such grace offend God, unless one believes in a God of wrath? Can God be polluted by a paralysis, or a bad eye, short stature, or disposition towards alcoholism, or some other biological condition? Is pure love tainted by seemingly outrageously acts? Is God offended by radical forgiveness or expansive grace? Is a stream of light breaking into the room defiled by the shadows? Is our God too small?

Well, Jesus heard their tweets about “authority on earth” and “too much-grace” and asked, “Why do you fill your minds with these questions? Which is easier to say: ‘your sins are forgiven’ or ‘get up and walk’? But so that you will know that the Human One has authority on the earth to forgive sins.” Jesus looked away from the critics to look the man who was paralyzed in the eyes, “I say to you, ‘get up, take your cot, and go home’.” Right away, the man stood before them, picked up his cot, and went home, praising God! And all the people were beside themselves with wonder. Filled with awe, and glorifying God, saying, “We’ve seen unimaginable things today.”

Oh, let us be the kinds of friends who carrying people to Christ? Let us not turn back when the line is long and the odds low- let us not always play it safe!  Let us engage in outrageous acts of compassion, being strong, being courageous, and doing everything in love. Let us share marvelous expansive grace and easy inclusion to unlikely candidates for unsolicited divine forgiveness. For we are all the unlikeliest recipients of God’s matchless, unmerited, marvelous grace. Amen.