

Have you ever been paralyzed by fear? Tried to scream out a warning, but nothing came out? That happened to me one night when I was at Wofford College, and I was riding with a friend. I was in the backseat of his car, and he was approaching and not slowing down, and went right through, at night time, a busy four-way intersection in front of Converse College. He just went right through the red light! I wanted to yell out, “Stop! Red light! Idiot!” Nothing came out! I just went ummhh! I couldn’t speak. In fact, when I made the noise, he turned around, and said, “What?” as he went under the red light. Now, friends like that can get you killed.

Fear. Our emotions and our bodies are connected more than we think. In ancient Judaism, they thought that all disease was the fault of some secret sin and was as punishment from God. From their point of view, first a sick man should be forgiven and then healed. I’ve been thinking about this. I don’t want to give the impression that I believe this, but to be honest, some disease is behavior related, and is our fault. Sometimes guilt and the stress of guilt of a secret sin can make you physically ill, and so even now, this odd little story relating forgiveness and healing does have some depth to ponder. It reminds me of Psalm 32, verse 4, “Day and night you punished me, Lord. My strength was completely drained as moisture is dried up by the summer heat, then I confessed my sins to you. I did not conceal my wrongdoings. I decided to confess them to you, and you forgave. You forgave all my sins.” Guilt can sap our energy. It can paralyze us with the fear of being found out, of being punished, of being judged. We can also be paralyzed by anger and betrayal so that we promise ourselves that we will never, ever trust anyone again. So we make ourselves broken and alone and cut off from all possible friendship, friends who might support us.

Kent Meyers wrote in a novel called The River Warren. In it, what the character, a woman, says, and listen to this, “You can think too much about the past. It can be like a chain that stakes you, and you run around it at the end of it and trample your whole life bare.” You can think too much of the past. Yes, you can.

We can be paralyzed also by bad habits, routines that keep us from responding to the God who makes all things new. Maybe God is calling us to new things and new behaviors, but we just keep doing the same old, same old because it’s comfortable. Sin isolates. It separates. Sin is selfishness without joy. Sin is the promise of freedom, but instead it enslaves us. It paralyzes us so that we cannot move or grow toward God or grow toward others. It cuts off, and it withers our souls. You can be paralyzed emotionally or spiritually or, in fact, physically.

Now, back to the Gospel here. Picture this house filled with people who wanted to be near Jesus, and maybe get something from Jesus, and homes back then more or less had flat roofs, and some commentaries say that the roofs had ceramic or terra cotta tiles of the type, which I have seen on a mission trip to Africa. In Africa, these tiles were very heavy, and they stacked on top of each other, and they were not nailed down in any way.

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An entire house had just the weight of one tile upon another overlapping that kept them in place. They were not nailed down so you could just move them out of the way, and lower the body down into the house, and then put them back later. Now, some other commentators say the house might have had a dirt and straw roof that they had to dig through. I don't know. Whichever way it was, the friends went to a lot of trouble, keeping the makeshift stretcher level as they climbed up there, and then fastening ropes and lowering their motionless friend down. These were friends. These were really good friends. Wouldn't you like to have some friends, who would do this? I tell you, if that is the definition of friendship, I'm not sure that I have very many friends. I've thought about it. I have only one friend in the world, which I can call up and say, "Meet me at the airport. Bring \$10,000 cash and your passport," and he would say, "What time?" That's a friend!

I saw an e-mail funny last week, and it said, "A really good friend will help you move a body." That's bad! Now, in a way, these four friends were moving a body, a paralyzed body that tradition, at the time, taught was caused by some sin, some punishment from God. Many of us, we can picture this in our minds because we saw pictures of this in our old Sunday school books. It's high drama. The frail man being lowered on ropes in a stretcher, and the crowded house where Jesus is teaching. It's actually, if you look at it, a very funny story. The noisy crowd pushing their way into this little house, and Jesus trying to teach and trying to talk over all the confusion, and all of a sudden, some dust falls from the ceiling, and these four faithful friends are lowering a stretcher and breaking in line with all these other people ahead! I can imagine Jesus thinking, what next? What next? Back to the friends, I have preached these verses for over 20 years, but I'm always seeing new things. I'm a slow learner. The new important things, the faith that led to this man's forgiveness, and more importantly, his forgiveness and his healing together, it was not his faith! It was the faith of his friends; it says so, that impressed Jesus! It plainly says in verse 5, "And when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, my son, your sins are forgiven."

How important are friends? If you read this story closely, you discover the man's forgiveness and his healing was based upon not his faith, but he was forgiven and healed because of the faith of his friends. The man is cured and forgiven because of the faith of his friends. We all need other people in our lives, other people pulling for us and praying for us and carrying us when we can't go. Remember that God said to Adam, or said about Adam, it is not good that man should be alone. To one degree or another, we all need other people around us to share our joys and to bear our sorrows and sometimes to intervene for us.

I'll never forget reading my grandmother's journals after she died. She kept up with the weather as a hobby. When the weather came on at MeMaw's house, you had to be quiet. That's what she watched. You could talk through the editorials, but you had to be quiet through the weather. Now, she knew full well that Hurricane Hugo was coming and was headed right toward the South Carolina coast, the South Carolina coast where my parents and two brothers, at the time, lived, less than one mile from the ocean. I called, and I

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spoke to them, and I ranted and I raved and I said, “Get out of there!” but they stayed. Now, McMaw knew that Hugo was headed their way, and I wanted to see what she wrote in her journal. Well, she wrote, with certainty of faith, just one sentence. She says, “I have prayed for them, and I know they will be all right.” That was that. It is good to have friends and family, who have faith on your behalf, pray on your behalf, and sometimes faith that carries you when you don’t have any. We need God, and we need each other. Here in this church, we are supposed to be friends in faith, supporting one another, and if need be, carrying one another, intervening.

A story is told as true that at a Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants assembled at the starting line of the 100-yard dash. They all started out with zeal to finish and to win, all except one little boy, who stumbled and tumbled and fell flat, and began to cry. The other eight slowed down, and they looked back, then they turned back, and they went back, and every one of them comforted this boy, who had fallen. In the middle of the race! One girl bent down and kissed him and said, “You’ll feel better.” Then all nine linked arms, and they walked together across the finish line. Everyone in the stands stood and cheered for several minutes.

In the Gospel, the impressive faith and forwardness of four friends gained forgiveness and healing for their paralyzed buddy in need. They believed in God, in God’s power to heal body and soul through Jesus Christ, and they believed in supporting each other.

Have you ever seen a Sequoia tree? I’ve seen only pictures. They grow to be huge. I’ve read that these Sequoia trees have a surprising fact about them. They have very shallow roots, but these Sequoia trees grow in groves and their roots are intertwined. One group by itself, a wind could blow it over, but they grow in groves with roots intertwined so that they can withstand wind and storm. Their strength is in all the trees supporting one another, not isolated individuals who happen to grow side by side as we happen to sit side by side in pews. They are together supporting one another. Folks, we need to know each other so we can pray for each other. We need to intervene for each other and support and hold each other accountable and let each other know that we are missed when we are gone. Another big point here is the scribes who say, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Indeed, who can?

Barclay’s commentary says that Jesus was flinging down a challenge to the religious experts thus Jesus was saying, yes, I am God’s Messiah. I have the power of God in flesh. I can forgive. He was not just a healer. Jesus is never presented as mere miracle worker. The miracles are incidental. The Gospel wants us to know who this Jesus is, and this story tells us who indeed can forgive sins, but God alone. The point seems to be that God can do both physical and spiritual healing, and Jesus can do both because Jesus has and is the power of and the person of God in flesh. It is a scandalous proclamation, but this is what we proclaim! This is the good news that God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross. Which is easier, to heal or to forgive? I wonder.

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You know the paralyzed man could have been healed, and he could have been able to walk again, and he still could have walked away from God! Right? There is more to life than these bodies, and we have more need of healing than of just an infirmity here or there. We need healing and cleansing of our souls. We are broken in our souls. That thought started me thinking a little deeper. How can you tell if a paralyzed man is healed? Well, it's easy. He gets up and he walks. Now, listen closely. How can you tell if someone knows they are forgiven? How can you tell? I think a forgiven woman or a forgiven man you can tell because they themselves are forgiving to others. Didn't Jesus teach just that? To forgive as you are forgiven. Sometimes people wonder, does God forgive me or will God forgive me? The truth is that the forgiveness offered to us in Jesus is the single most important thing in our lives. Without it, we have nothing, and with it, we have everything. Remember, we were created in the image of God, but we are not God. We are humans, and we are sinful, but having been created in the image of God, we are meant to be in fellowship with our creator, and that's the way we were made. When something isn't right about our relationship with God, then nothing else in our life is going to go right. The first thing the risen Christ taught His disciples was about forgiveness. He said, "Peace be with you, as the Father sent me, I am sending you." Then he breathes on them in the Gospel of John, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone who sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are retained." Recall that night in the Upper Room, when Jesus blesses them, and with the gift of peace, He sends them out to others, and He sends us out to others. We are sent with the gift of the Spirit, and we are challenged to be forgiving. So friends, and I say friends as a serious word, let us pray for and help our friends and our families find the forgiveness that makes us whole. Amen.