

Friendship and Forgiveness Can Be Miracles, Too

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Luke 5:17-26

Today we continue our series on Jesus' miracles by looking at Luke's version of the healing of a paralyzed man whose friends push through a crowd and a roof to bring him to Jesus

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralyzed—'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

Stories like the one I just read, or stories about the healing of any physical or mental limitation or disease really, beg for the utmost care in interpretation, because we understand more about the brain and the central nervous system now than the Gospel writers did. It is not lost on me that just last Sunday, during our time of celebrations and concerns, we heard about a good man who was paralyzed in a freak accident on a hunting trip. While I have been praying for Chris and will continue to do so, I am also aware of people of great faith who have been injured or debilitated in such a way that they do not or did not recover the ability to walk. No amount of fervent prayer or technological wizardry changed that.

Certain names come to mind. Some of you will recognize the name Joni Eareckson Tada, the great evangelical writer who became paraplegic after she was in a diving accident at the age of 19 and never recovered the ability to walk, yet she grew into a symbol of faith and the power of a positive attitude in the midst of challenging circumstances. Many of us remember Christopher Reeve, who played Superman for heaven's sake, whose spinal cord was severed in an equestrian mishap and even with all the resources in the world available to him would never be the same. I was 12 when Daryl Stingley, the New England Patriots receiver whose 1978 season football card I'd just collected, was paralyzed by a hit to his helmet delivered by Jack Tatum. None of those three individuals was ever able to walk again, but all of them found meaning and even real joy in life afterwards. They may not have been able to literally ambulate again, but something happened in them that allowed them, despite physical limitations and inevitable frustrations, to move forward with the life they had after their accident and make the most of what they had. That might well not have happened.

Of course, literally being unable to walk or to move one's arms is not the only sort of paralysis a person can face. We all know people who have been rendered emotionally and psychologically or spiritually immobile by something that has befallen them. They're just stuck. Stuck in their fear. Stuck in their anger. Stuck in their resentment. Seemingly unable to move forward in life, unable to

see beyond what they think will forever limit them, unable to step out in faith or to stand up with courage and vulnerability to do what needs to be done or to say what needs to be said or to seek the kind of healing conversations they need to engage. That kind of spiritual paralysis can be just as debilitating to one's soul as physical paralysis can be to one's body.

I'm going to take a wild guess and say that almost all of us in this room, at some point or another, have experienced at least something of that sort of paralysis. The kind that just keeps you stuck.

It's always a bit of a miracle when any of us, regardless of the challenges we face, is able to deal with life on life's terms, no matter how deeply we've been wounded or what our level of physical limitation. It's always a bit of a miracle when a person, with God's help, doesn't let what has happened to them keep them from moving forward in life with courage and grace into an uncertain future. It's always a bit of a miracle when people can move forward out of their "stuckness".

We are not given any of the backstory of the paralyzed man in today's text from Luke's Gospel. We have no idea how he lost his ability to walk or how long he'd been confined to a bed. What we do know is that he had friends who were willing to carry him and that they didn't let obstacles and barriers stand in the way of bringing him into the awareness of the presence of God. And we also know that, curiously, the very first words Jesus speaks to the man are, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Only *after speaking those words* does Jesus say, "Stand up, take your bed, and go to your home." Then the man does just that, glorifying God on his way, and everyone who sees it is amazed.

Whatever this text might have to say about physical paralysis, I think it can also speak to the sort of spiritual paralysis with which most of us are more familiar. It helps answer the question of how a person can get from stuckness, the inability to move forward with courage, grit, and grace, to glorifying God and walking bravely and compassionately into the future. It helps answer the question of how we might get up off our mat and get to glorifying God with our mouths, and our hearts, and our lives.

Well, the first thing the story suggests is that it helps to have friends and to be a friend. It is important to be part of a community and to get invested enough to go deep in community. What communities and circles of friends do, when we put ourselves out there enough to really be a part of them and not just hang around the edges, is they give us a chance to carry each other when we need to be carried. Everyone needs to be carried from time to time.

So I do love what the faithful servant and friend Samwise Gamgee says to his fellow hobbit Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, as Frodo continues his quest to fight Sauron's evil. I love what Sam says to Frodo: *You can trust us to stick with you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours—closer than you yourself keep it. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Mr. Frodo.*¹

Now we don't know how long this man the friends brought to Jesus for healing had been paralyzed, but we do know that his friends were not going to just abandon him. They stuck with him and wouldn't let him face trouble alone. That's what friends and real communities do, they stand by each other, and they even carry each other.

Last week I quoted from Winnie the Pooh. Let's talk about Winnie the Pooh a little bit more. Let's talk about Eeyore. Those characters in the Hundred Acre Wood just won't let gloomy Eeyore go. *"It's my birthday."* They will not leave him behind. They accept him as he is and love him anyway.

So back to the world of hobbits. I love what Sam tells Frodo, when they've entered Mordor and are traveling up to Mount Doom and Frodo can feel nothing but exhaustion and paranoia from carrying the ring of power for so long. Sam says, "Come on Mr. Frodo, I can't carry it for you, but I can carry

you.”² We can’t take the burden that a friend has to face off of them, but we can help carry them along while they carry it.

This sort of work happens all the time in human community. I’ve seen it happen so often. When someone shares their pain and struggle aloud in a meeting or a small group and others come around them later and offer a listening ear, a cup of coffee, perhaps even a carefully phrased word of wisdom or a prayer. Sometimes people actually pray out loud on the spot. They don’t just say, “Oh, I’ll pray for you.” I know people, in this congregation, who actually pray on the spot. Out loud. (That might constitute a miracle, if some of us were able to do that).

Regardless of whether prayer comes to our lips or we just offer a listening ear, what friendship like this can do is transport someone into the awareness of God’s presence in their life, which can help get them off the mat and stand up and step forth into life again. One of the beauties of Stephen Ministry is that people are equipped to do this sort of work for each other in times of transition, and I want you to hear more about it after this service/and we had a nice turn out after the morning service to hear more about it. The thing about being a follower of Jesus is that our friendship circle just keeps getting wider and wider and we are reminded that we are called to befriend not just the people we know, the people we might yet meet. A good many of us became friends at some level, even if just a cursory one, with men and women experiencing homelessness through our Facets hypothermia shelter week. In providing a warm place to sleep and a warm and heartfelt welcome, we carried them and ourselves into an experience of God’s love.

A second thing this story suggests about moving from stuckness into stepping forth is that it involves persistence in overcoming barriers. It’s interesting to look at the different ways this story is told in other gospels. In Matthew’s rendering, it seems as though the man’s friends are just carrying him along, out in the road somewhere, not even necessarily coming to Jesus, and Jesus spots them carrying the paralyzed man and Matthew says, seeing their faith, he tells the paralytic, “Take heart, your sins are forgiven.”

In Luke’s version, there is a huge crowd. (There are crowds all over the 5th chapter of Luke, like last week’s story when Jesus wound up teaching them from the boat). There’s a huge crowd. Jesus is inside a house that is surrounded with people, and the friends quite intentionally want to bring their friend to him for healing. By the time the friends get the paralytic into Jesus’ presence, they’ve made their way through a crowd, they have carried him on his bed up onto the roof, and they have torn the roof apart to get him down to Jesus. That’s faith. That’s persistence. That’s not just giving up at the first sign of difficulty. So when Luke says, “Jesus, *seeing their faith* said to the man, “Friend, your sins are forgiven,” that carries a little more oomph, doesn’t it? Their faith made them work on behalf of their friend.

Luke won’t let us forget that there are plenty of barriers that get in the way of bringing people in touch with the divine love that comes from Jesus. Crowds of people and what they think can get in the way. Physical and emotional walls can impede progress. You may even have to take the roof off to get one of God’s beloveds into a place where they can really feel compassion. But what friends do—what compassionate human beings do for other human beings who are in pain, or in fear, or just plain stuck—is that they don’t let those barriers get the last word. Jesus certainly didn’t. The faith Jesus recognizes and commends in this story is one which won’t let walls and even roofs stop compassion.

A third thing this story suggests about moving from spiritual stuckness into being able to walk in the spirit is that it involves grace and forgiveness. Sometimes the biggest barrier to be overcome is our own or another person’s shame, guilt, or resentment. Those things themselves can paralyze us.

When Jesus' first words to the paralyzed man are, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you," I don't think that's some sort of theological commentary on why the man is paralyzed in the first place. In other places in the gospels, most notably John chapter 9, Jesus removes the link between illness or infirmity and sin or deserving. Contrary to what Jesus disciples want to believe the man Jesus heals in John 9 he isn't born blind because he's sinned or his parents have sinned. He's just born blind. Sometimes things just happen. Then the question is how can God's glory be revealed in the midst of this, in the midst of what is. When you are paralyzed and you find you can't walk again physically. How can God's glory be revealed when the miracle we wanted doesn't come and things are the way they are with us not because we've sinned or somehow deserve what has befallen us.

That being said, it is really interesting that Jesus' first words to this man are, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you."

I wonder what would happen if we played "Have You Ever?", that game that Susan had the children play with us earlier, and we didn't ask about about piloting helicopters, or riding in blimps, or jumping out of airplanes, but instead talked about missteps, and hurt feelings, and mental illness, and brokenness, and deep pain? I wonder what would happen if we talked about those things and we set aside the shame and just got real and honest with each other. What sort of miracles might happen then? Not remarkably being able to physically walk again miracles, but miracles like being able to step forward and let go of resentment, and let go of shame, and let go of that guilt that has pulled you down for so, so long, because those things can paralyze us, they really can.

So what do we do with this text about a man who can't move whose friends bring him into the presence of Jesus and then finds that he can walk again? Well maybe we leave this place and we remember the power of friendship, the power of being in a place where everybody knows your name, to quote that old *Cheers* theme song. We might leave this place and remember the power of persistence, of not letting walls and roofs and crowds keep us from getting people we love into the presence of the divine. We might also remember of knowing that we are accepted and loved and called to embody grace to others.

Let's see what happens when we do that. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1 J. R. R. Tolkien *Lord of the Rings-Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston, Mariner Books, 2012).

2 A. A. Milne *Winnie the Pooh-Eeyore Has a Birthday* (London, Egmont Books, Ltd. 2016).

3 J. R. R. Tolkien *Lord of the Rings-Return of the King* (New York Del Rey [Ballantine Books], 1986).