



“A Big Hole”

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Mark 2: 1-12

by the Rev. Dr. Stacy C. Smith

Our story this morning is the last one in our short tour through the healing miracles in Mark, and to me, it's a great one. The other two healing miracles we have looked at – the healing of a blind man and a deaf man – occurred only in the Gospel of Mark. But this story, in which Jesus heals a paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof of Jesus's home by four of the man's friends, this story makes an appearance in three out of the four gospels. And it's no wonder that gospel writers wanted to include this one, because this is just a great story. And of course, the greatness of this story lies in healing, and in Jesus's miraculous power, but it's also memorable because of this awesome visual of four guys, carrying the paralytic man to the roof of Jesus's home, and cutting out a hole in it so their friend could be healed by Jesus.

Think about the times when you really, really wanted to get in some place and were stuck in a crowd. It probably happens less since COVID but I'm sure you know the feeling – I don't know, maybe that time you went to a Rolling Stones concert, or maybe something like Nascar, I've never been but I think they have big crowds, maybe even the ongoing New York State Fair. Or if you've flown anywhere recently, chances are you've been stuck in this massive sea of humanity and you just want to get through security, or get to your seat, get anywhere other than right here.

And this is basically what these friends do in this incredible story. My buddy Al Masters describes the scene in vivid detail: “One can visualize and smell the bodies of the standing room only crowd packed tightly around Jesus, see the gestures and hear the voice inflections as he preaches the homecoming sermon, feel the strain of lifting the pallet – the perspiration and heavy breathing of the quartet of EMS-like stretcher bearers – and hear the sound of cascading roof debris. We can see the anxious anticipation and determined intensity on the face of the paralytic as he is lowered in front of the crowd, the scowl on the scribes faces, and the amazed, awestruck crowd

parting like the Red Sea as the forgiven and healed man walks out with his mat tucked under his arm like an Appalachian trail hiker.”¹

Like feeding of the 5,000 or raising of Lazarus, this is one of those miracles of Jesus that is just so grand, so awesome, that it anchors our understanding of Jesus. But I remember as I was writing the hymn that we’ll sing in a bit, drawing on this story, I remember my husband asking me what I was working on, and I told him well, I’m working on a hymn about this story that I love, and I told him the story because he was not, shall we say, particularly versed in to the Bible. And he was like, And you like this story? And I said, well, yes, it’s so cool, the visual of the roof and the scribes and the paralyzed man walking home. And he burst out laughing and rolled his eyes at me and said, “Oh, come on. Jesus was at home, right? Can you imagine Mary’s response to a hole in the roof? I mean, it sounds like a good story but what happens next? You know that if someone cut a hole in our roof you would completely freak out.”

And of course he was right, and even worse, he has proof. In 2016, when my husband and I were dealing with his cancer and me finishing my doctoral work and changing jobs and just all kinds of craziness, we also endeavored to finish out 1200 square feet of attic space in our house to make rooms for my stepkids. And there was no window in the back of the attic where my Molly’s would be, so we had to install windows that were up to code for a bedroom, so we had to add a dormer to the roof and for these two big windows. Which means we had to cut a big hole in the roof.

Now in a normal construction scenario this might not have been a huge problem. Because my husband was supposed to be doing a lot of this work on his own but, you know, brain cancer had sort of gotten in our way, so we were relying on a cobbled-together series of contractors and carpenters, literally a small army of guys, some of whom would show up on a daily basis and some who wouldn’t, some who knew something about construction and some who knew nothing. These were mostly guys that my husband had met when he started a company for people coming out of incarceration and addiction, and so they were great guys, but they were just dealing with a lot on their own, and prioritizing my attic reno was just not something that was always first on their mind. It was a construction nightmare.

And all I knew is that, when we cut this hole in the roof, this was going to be it. Once it was there, we had to make sure we had people who knew what they were doing and who would show up, each and every day, to build out this dormer. Because if we didn’t, I just knew there would be some April rainstorm and we would be sunk, literally, figuratively, metaphorically, every way you could sink, we would be there. Once the hole was in the roof, we couldn’t stop. And I was petrified. I was losing my

¹ Al Masters, *Feasting on the Word*, B1, p. 381-2.

mind on an almost daily basis, while poor Kevin was trying to make me feel better while starting chemo and radiation. I will say, today the windows look beautiful and are up to code, thank you very much, but in the midst of writing this hymn, Kevin definitely reminded me that as much as I love the idea of four friends who would do anything to help their loved one, cutting a big hole in my roof might go too far.

But in this story, a big hole in the roof seems to be the least of anyone's problems. No, the big issue at hand here is the scribes from the temple. They, in fact, are the focus of this story. The big hole, the dedicated friends, the paralyzed man picking up his mat and going home: this is actually a back drop to what Mark really wants to point out, and the thing that upsets the scribes the most. Mary and Jesus, they don't seem upset about a big hole in the roof, but the scribes are upset that Jesus appears has the power to forgive sin, something that, according to Mark, is actually more difficult to do than fixing a hole, or even making a paralyzed man walk again.

That sounds kind of weird to us. When Jesus asks which is easier, to say to the paralytic "Your sins are forgiven," or "Stand up, take up your mat and walk," we would naturally say that commanding a paralyzed person to walk is much harder than forgiving sins. After all, we have a prayer of confession each and every Sunday and our liturgist reminds us that our sins are forgiven. Plus, healing a paralyzed person is extremely difficult; it was tough in Jesus's time, and it's tough now. So to us, saying "Stand up and walk," is much harder than saying, "Your sins are forgiven." But Mark seems knows better.

Jesus and the scribes know that forgiving sins is much more difficult, more life-changing, more upsetting to the normal order of things, than performing a miraculous healing. And that's a big problem for the scribes. It's a problem theologically, socially, but maybe above all, financially. Theologian Jerry Irish² says, "The point in telling the paralytic to stand, pick up his mat and go home is [not really so Jesus can demonstrate to the crowd that he has the power to heal the body. The point is] so the scribes may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... Jesus's healing ministry challenges the system in Galilee whereby the urban secular and religious powers exploited the rural poor. The sick among the peasantry, often in such a state because of excessive taxation for the expropriation of their land, were said to be so because they have sinned. Their only recourse was the temple, where they could remedy their sin, but only by giving up more of their meager resources, thereby increasing their poverty and the likelihood of further sickness... [But] if Jesus can cure

² Jerry Irish, *Feasting on the Word*, B1, p. 381-2.

sickness, and sickness is a divine punishment for sin, then Jesus can wield the divine power of forgiveness as well; he is, [perhaps above all, a financial] threat to the...elite."

And we might say, well, yes to Mark it would be more difficult to forgive sin than create miraculous physical healing because they didn't know what we know, that sickness isn't caused by sin, it's caused by germs and chemical imbalances and injuries. People of the ancient Middle East didn't know why someone was blind or deaf or paralyzed, so they believed that it must be some strange, divine punishment for their sins. We, of course, know better.

But come on, are we really so different from the people of Mark's time? No, we constantly label people with illness as sinners. People with eating disorders, people with AIDS, people with addictions, people with Type 2 diabetes: we often think that these people have this sickness because of their mistakes, their sin. Because they don't take care of their bodies, because they don't care about others, because they can't control themselves, that's why they're sick.

And on top of that, we attach the same financial constraints on the sick that the scribes and Pharisees do. Our healthcare system relies on making a profit for it to function, just like the temple. We say to sick people, well yes, we can make you better, but you need to come to the temple, I mean, the insurance company or the hospital or the clinic, and in order to make you whole, you have to pay up. And if you can't, well, you can't get healthcare, or you can but we are going to financially penalize you to an obscene level such that your whole life might be upended. And so just like in the Gospel of Mark, we tend to see our sick as shameful, and we have a healthcare system that too often relies on desperation, greed, shame and yes, sin.

So if you had a friend, a brother, a son, a loved one who was sick, and couldn't afford healthcare, and you heard of a healer who was helping people and didn't require money or health insurance, and didn't judge you for not having those things, and moreover, didn't assume you were a bad person, a sinner, because of this illness, what would you do? I know what I would do, and what you would too: you would grab a few friends, and cut a big hole in the roof.

When Jesus forgives the man's sins, and he stands up and takes his mat and walks out, the crowd exclaims, "We have never seen anything like this." But they are not saying they have never seen a man healed from his ailments. They are saying, "We have never seen someone who can forgive our sins so completely, so thoroughly, without having to pay for access to the temple through the scribes or the chief priests. This man Jesus has the power to heal, to forgive, to wash away our shame, our mistakes, our sorrow. And this, this power to offer us complete forgiveness, this is something we have never seen."

And you know, when I think back to that hole in my roof, that hole we created during our construction process, I have to admit: fixing the hole was the easy part. Building out the dormer was, ultimately, just a matter of time and wood and nails. What was much harder was finding forgiveness in myself, and with others, for getting us to that point in the first place.

Because I had made the determination to buy this house. I wanted to stay in my neighborhood and we couldn't afford a big enough house for all of us to live comfortably, so I thought, we will just undertake this massive construction project on this house that I want, and it will all be fine. And even when we discovered Kevin had cancer, and completing the job would be much more difficult, I pressed on because, in my mind, we just had to do it. I wouldn't let us hire a real contractor because I thought, we don't have the money and we'll be able to make it work. And I didn't listen to myself or my husband or my family when they told me, this is just too much to handle right now.

Instead, I said to my husband, and I quote: "I know you're going through chemo right now, but I really need you to tile the bathroom." I didn't entertain the thought that maybe we should stop, maybe we shouldn't cut this big hole in the roof, because it not what I wanted, it was my timeline, and I just said, I don't care. We have to do this all right now. And I mean, it ended up OK, and looking back I can better understand why I made the decisions I did, why I pushed everyone so hard. But it made a year of our lives unbelievably stressful at a time when we should have been focusing on healing and recovery, and I felt a lot of guilt and shame about that. It was much easier to patch the hole in the roof than to forgive myself for putting it there in the first place. Forgiveness is often much harder than healing.

That big hole in the roof, the friends with the stretcher, the unreliable carpenters, the looming construction deadline: these are all just back drop to the real miracle story that Mark wants to tell, the fact that Jesus can look at all of our failings, all of our mistakes, all of our sins, all of our shame, and say, You don't need to hold on to any of that. You are loved. You are forgiven. Whatever that big hole is, whatever open, gaping wound you carry, whatever errors you might have committed that got you into whatever trouble you've got, You are forgiven. Completely, totally, thoroughly and wholly, forgiven.

May it be so. Amen.