

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**The Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2021**  
**Mark 2:1-12, Luke 1:39-49**  
**“Share Hope” by Rev. Sue Trigger**

**GOSPEL LESSON**

Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

**GOSPEL LESSON**

Luke 1:39-49

(CEB)

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies you, Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
he who is mighty has done great things for me.  
His mercy flows from generation to generation;  
Holy is his name.  
In his strength he will scatter the proud.  
He will bring down the mighty and exalt the humble.  
From his abundance he will fill the hungry.  
In his mercy he will save us.  
My soul magnifies you, Almighty God.”

(Adapted due to events of 12/10/2021)

I love the ingenuity of the 4 friends who were determined to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus in today’s story from the gospel of Mark. Imagine what it was like to be in the house and hear these four men pounding a hole into the roof. Imagine what it was like as wood and thatching fell on the tightly squeezed group of people. Imagine how the homeowner must have felt! The story doesn’t

tell us about the homeowner's feelings. I'm going to hope that the 4 men repaired it. But that's not the point of the story. What really matters in this story is how Jesus reacts to the paralyzed man who dropped down from the roof right in front of him. "When Jesus saw the faith of his friends, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

What an odd thing to say, isn't it? Why does he call him son? Why does he say his sins are forgiven? There is so much going on in this story that I don't want to leap too quickly to the fact that Jesus heals him. We're going to stay in this moment just a bit longer.

Last week, Mitch talked about seeing hope, and this story is a great example of Jesus seeing the hope of the four friends. He is moved by their faith that was so great they would do whatever it took to get their friend to him. Their faith was built on all the things Jesus was teaching about, and the greatest of these was love. These men had such great love for their friend that they carried him on a mat to the house where Jesus was. When they couldn't get in, they figured out how to let him down through the roof. All so that he might see a man they believed could heal him.

While the 4 men were hoping Jesus would fix their friend, Jesus was looking deeper. He was looking at a man who had been ostracized from the community because of a physical ailment. The common belief was that physical ailments were the result of sin. This is a viewpoint that developed at least 1,300 years earlier but was still pervasive during Jesus' lifetime. Remember the story of the man born blind? The disciples asked Jesus if it was his sin or the sin of his parents that caused his blindness. That viewpoint would have also been applied to the paralyzed man. It didn't matter whether he was born paralyzed or had been hit by a chariot. They would have projected blame onto the man. Jesus knew this and so his first priority was the man's dignity. "Son," he called him. Not sir, not friend, but son. By doing this, Jesus was breaking a social barrier. He knew, just by virtue of his physical condition, that the man would have been treated as an outsider. He would have been ridiculed for a sin that he may not have committed. Jesus' salutation, "son" brought him into the community. Not only was he included, but he was also an honored part of the family. Just that one word would have stunned the crowd and set the scribes in the room on their ears.

The next part of the sentence was explosive. "Your sins are forgiven." What? That's blasphemy the scribes cried! "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" This is an interesting comment from the scribes. Jesus didn't say "I forgive your sins." He said "Your sins are forgiven." There are

some translations of the Bible that have interpreted the Greek to say, “I forgive your sins.” If yours does, be aware that that is more of a theological interpretation than a language translation. The language says, “Your sins are forgiven.” That’s an important distinction. Jesus gave the credit to God. In the gospel of John, Jesus said, “I told you already, but you did not believe. I do miracles in my Father’s name. Those miracles show who I am.” (John 10:25) This would have been so foreign to a group of people who had learned that sins were forgiven through a sacrificial offering. They understood that a ritual sacrifice was how sin was forgiven, but Jesus had just said that the man’s sins were forgiven without that ritual. I suspect the paralyzed man couldn’t carry out that ritual anyway. Jesus was saying something radical for sure. We know that he eventually turned over the tables at the temple where animals for sacrifice were sold. He was showing the disciples and scribes that God’s way is different from the ritual practices of the faith community. In the eyes of God, faith is enough.<sup>i</sup>

What’s interesting about this story is that it’s not the paralyzed man’s faith that Jesus is interested in. It’s the faith of his friends who would have risked being ostracized along with their paralyzed friend. They hoped that Jesus would rescue their friend, and their hope was enough. The faithful hope of a small community of friends lifted the paralyzed man from despair to wholeness – even before he was healed. Jesus named him part of the community and pointed to God, as the source of forgiveness. For the scribes it was blasphemy, for the paralyzed man it was hope.

It is interesting that the story doesn’t tell us anything about the faith of the paralyzed man. He doesn’t ask for mercy or healing. He may have been too stunned from being let down through the roof to say anything, but it doesn’t matter. The restoration of the man’s place in the community and the healing of his body were gifts of grace. God’s unmerited and unconditional love. In this situation, Jesus wasn’t concerned about the man’s faith, it was the faith of his friends that mattered. God worked through a community of people.

Today’s story in Luke highlights the importance of community. Mary went to see her cousin Elizabeth who was also carrying a child God was sending into the world with a special message. Elizabeth’s son John would go ahead of Jesus and prepare the way for him. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, there would be a community of followers waiting for him. Through Mary and

Elizabeth, God was bringing together a beloved community that would share the hope found in Jesus with the world.

In some ways, the institutional church has struggled to hold onto the beloved community. Our practices of faith have become more and more personal and less about shared community. Today the life of the church is influenced more by the individual preferences of members. “What do I want?” rather than what is best for the community. We often read the Bible as instructions for our personal fulfillment rather than teachings given to communities. We forget that the promises made to individuals like Abraham and Moses, were not just for themselves, but for the purpose of creating a community of faith. All of the gospels and letters of the New Testament were not written to individuals, but for communities. Jesus’ ministry wasn’t about saving a few individuals, but about building a community. He declared that Peter would be the cornerstone and upon this rock I will build my church.

The individualization of the church has had an impact on how we understand discipleship. Doug Ponder, a church planter and editor for the International Mission Board magazine of the Southern Baptist convention wrote about the ways that individualism has fundamentally redefined discipleship in the United States. People have learned that the church is “where I go to worship for my own personal nurture and growth”. The structure of the Church today leads people to believe that the work of the church belongs to the paid staff. Ponder wrote, “Indeed, any approach to discipleship that does not stress the need to share life with God’s people fails to understand the most basic aspect of the law of Christ” (Gal. 5:14; 6:2). He notes that the apostle Paul spoke about this in the book of Ephesians where he explained that the work of teaching and equipping disciples is the responsibility of the whole church and that only by working together will the church see the growth and maturity of its members (*Eph. 4:12–16*).

Ponder illustrates the problem by using a popular slogan in the world of sports, “Players win games. Teams win championships.” He explains that westerners struggle to think and act in step with this truth. That’s because certain thoughts, habits, and societal incentives have permeated our culture with imbalanced tendencies toward autonomy, self-sufficiency, and (perceived) uniqueness. Together these make what Ponder calls “an unholy trinity of individualism.”<sup>ii</sup>

I suppose we shouldn't be all that surprised that individualism has seeped into the Church. We live in a culture where personal liberty is a higher value than the greater good. Ponder says we are living in a time of cultural blindness. The trouble is that, like fish in water, we struggle to notice our own environment. When individualism is all we know, we filter everything we see or think through this lens. As Ponder states, "Cultural blindness is harmful to the church's witness in the world."

This is a place where the Church can play an important role in our society. We can model the community God intends us to be. The kind of community Jesus celebrated when the 4 friends carried their paralyzed friend to him. The first step is to renew our churches and live into our calling to be the body of Christ together rather than individuals seeking personal fulfillment. That will require all of us to work together, sharing our gifts and talents for the greater good. It is a place where each of us join in the practices of faith, carrying one another's burdens, seeing one another's pain, generously sharing our prized treasure – our hope in Jesus.

Charlene Jin Lee wrote about a pastor friend who visited a church member's son who as in hospice care. The young man was dying of AIDS. His body frail and weak, he looked to the pastor and confessed, "I've lost hope, and I don't think I believe in God anymore." Her friend, moved with compassion, reached out his arms and said to the young man: "That is okay, son. Lean on my faith. I have been walking closely with God, and I have sure hope in God who is watching over you, so take my hope and lean on my faith...God who sees you and calls you, "Child." May we all share such hope.

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<sup>i</sup> David Ewart, [www.holytextures.com](http://www.holytextures.com).

<sup>ii</sup> Doug Ponder, How Individualism Corrupts the Church's Mission, International Mission Board Magazine, <https://www.imb.org/2019/03/14/how-individualism-corrupts-mission/>, March 14, 2019.