

Prayer of the Day: Dear God of Power and Love, we feel your presence as with a mother's tender hand, or arms of friends carrying us to you. And so we come to give you praise and glory and to feel healing balm fill our souls. Amaze us, again O God, with the presence of Christ and his healing power to transform our lives. Fill us with steadfast love and send us to help open the way for others to come in, in the name of Christ. Amen.

Finding a Way In

1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 5:17-26

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January 31, 2010 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

The story of the gospels is how Jesus makes God's love accessible to those who feel distant. He makes the healing power of compassion and forgiveness real for those who need it. And in the end he will be condemned for blasphemy – which means to disparage or defame God or to diminish God's glory. The irony of this text is that faithfulness and glory is not found in the ones who know all the "right" theology and who would be the ones to condemn. Rather God is glorified in a few anonymous neighbors / friends who bring a man to Jesus however difficult that may be, whatever obstacles there are to overcome. Hear what the Spirit may say ... **Luke 5**

Each week a minister has the challenge, the fun, the stress of a sermon title. It should capture the essence of what worship is about that day. At least, what I think it's all about ... as if, the way God's Spirit moves among our minds and hearts is really under my control! A title should be simple and relevant, with at least a hint about God's love or Jesus. And it's out there on the board for the whole world to see. So it's got to be clever and catchy, too! As if someone walking or driving by can't help but come inside. As if! ☺

I thought about titling this sermon: "Come to Jesus!" When I shared it with Suzanne, she shivered and she gave me that look something between you silly man and don't even go near there with a ten-foot pole! Truth be told, I was a bit wary myself. You see, that kind of faith expression made me feel like more fleeing Jesus for a long time. I was raised in a church not unlike ours in many ways. No dancing in the aisles, nobody getting too excited; pretty good at using our minds as much as any thing else. The way I heard it Jesus was kind of like a theological Sudoku to figure out; or heaven forbid something of an academic specimen to dissect as if we're in a basic biology class! Now hear me: that's what I observed. I'm sure there were a lot of very good people who heard it all differently, and I know there are people here ... among whom God's Spirit moves powerfully, passionately.

The thing is, as I look back on my younger days, God seemed more like something to be admired ... sort of from a distance. Not so bad, really. I mean there was the old Dumbledore-ish man sitting on a throne, but I also knew God's Spirit is so much more. I felt comfortable and accepted, certainly not judged in anger or condemned in disappointment, and never threatened with the fires of hell.

Then I went to college, where people talked a lot about Jesus. Talked about miracles literally, healings graphically, talked about faith and what he expected of us pretty fundamentally. And all of sudden I felt like a strange outsider. I went to big new churches and beautiful old ones,

trying to find a way to fit in. Which sometimes felt like turning off my rational mind when I approached the outside walls, or silencing heart-full questions as I heard or read what was said inside. It was frustrating, not very empowering or life giving. Really at times, amid all the other young adult angst about who I could love and what I should do with my life, it felt a bit paralyzing, in a way.

You know what I mean? Maybe your details are different. Maybe blessedly you've never felt distant from God, Jesus, the Spirit ... whatever you'd say. Though tense chuckles, even anger and tears in stories you've shared tell better. Honestly, haven't we all had at least moments that felt like lying on a mat stiffened with disgust about ourselves; immobilized by questions of why, how and what happened; frozen with fear about the future; cut down by someone's words even in a place like church.

You know at all what Luke means? A few friends or neighbors carried a man who was paralyzed. They'd heard about Jesus. They could tell he was in that house over there where the crowds crammed in. So solid in door and windows they had to find another way in to Jesus' healing power.

Now, before we go any further, let's be clear about healing and sin. O.k., in Jesus' day some people thought something wrong with our bodies was caused by a wrong we'd done. We still hear such craziness today. *But never from Jesus!* You see, in the gospels healing is not only, often not even really about fixing physical ailments and limitations. It's about relationships – eliminating alienation caused by being lame, removing rejection and judgment, restoring full life in loving goodness. *Healing was more about value as a human being than specific ability to function.* (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992. 315) The connection with sin is to lament that separation caused by our ailments or illnesses – separation from God, from others, from abundant life God intends. And in Jesus' time, this alienation was even true of religion. Lepers, blind and lame people couldn't come near the altar – the presence of God. And of course, that kind of thinking raises questions about all of our imperfections. You know, I expect that for people listening to Luke tell this story whether or not the man was literally paralyzed would not have mattered. They understood what it was like. They longed for forgiveness that said such things won't bind you anymore; for reconciliation that meant they could share love with others again – the healing power of God's grace that Jesus gives so fully, completely, unconditionally. Unless I'm reading it all wrong, we understand what it's like to long for the One who heals every ill we have; who gives us peace beyond our fears about our bodies or our world; who gives hope beyond sorrow we feel for others and strength to love every sister, every brother.

Let me say it simply. The essence of this sermon is that we come here to feel the healing power of God's love in Jesus Christ – to feel it change our lives. And God calls us as partners in Christ's service to help others find a way to share that power, as well. Each week a minister has a sermon title. Every day we have the challenge, the fun, the stress of making God's love relevant, even catchy. How do we do it?

You know, when I put my heart into Luke's story, what strikes me most are people carrying the lame man, not just coming concerned about themselves. I wonder: had they ever felt so left out before? Did they have other things they could have been doing? They're left nameless – could

be anyone like you and me. Then there are the Pharisees and scribes all around Jesus. They're the group of faithful Jews concerned primarily with interpreting, teaching and preserving the faith amidst a hostile world of potential corruptions. They'd be most caught up with violations, re-interpretations, or (cynically) anyone who challenged their authority to decide. Now this is the first time they appear in Luke's gospel. So I'm thinking, just maybe they aren't so purposefully antagonistic yet. Later they'll plot to kill Jesus. On this day maybe they're like everyone else intrigued about him. Trouble is, as Luke describes it they're blocking the way in, they're a barrier between Jesus and the paralyzed man.

So I'm wondering where in our society or church culture are there barriers we've felt or others sense? Barriers about reading and interpreting the Bible; specific ideas that have been taught; ways the church worships and works; experiences of our lives and world that don't make sense and make us wonder about God. *The irony is, of course, that what may seem like barriers to others may well be beloved parts of faith some of us want to preserve.* Far from bad they express the same sort of healing power in response to paralyzing questions and experiences. *It's more a question of how accessible and meaningful it all feels to people just trying to find a way in among us.* Now I don't have any secret plans for change, any particular detail in mind, or any magic answer. I just know we have a big sanctuary! That's a challenge when it can feel empty with over 150. And it's a kind of statement of good news – there's always room for more. And even though the roof is high, we don't have to bring them in that way. It's a Spirit in our hearts and minds that conveys why this building was built in the first place ... to be a meeting place for everyone in town, a sanctuary for all.

About a week ago leaders of presbytery gathered for a retreat to talk about changes and challenges facing the church. Internal challenges about who we are when so many of us have different ways we've come to God, or feel like we're just now starting to come. Changes in how we reach out to others in the world. You know, friends I love talk deep theology. I love to sing our hymns and tell many Bible stories. I love the history that oozes from these pews. I don't want to lose it all. And I know that we could risk becoming like Pharisees.

There are people all around us looking and longing, who feel like they're running into a wall of faith. From messages they hear or the things they see – maybe not from us exactly – messages still ... and they feel they have to deny part of who they are to get close to God. They want to find somewhere to be fully themselves. And it makes them go through the roof when they can't find a way in to Jesus. They're our friends and neighbors and anonymous strangers.

Dear friends, if we strip away all the stained glass, if we take down all the complicated theology these banners represent, when our hymns fall silent and the Bible stories come to an end ... *people like you and me will keep coming here because they feel the love of Christ.* Because Jesus is present in the way we love each other with our encouraging words and forgiving hugs and listening ears. And because when they feel it here, ailing minds and hearts and bodies will be healed.

It will be like meeting Jesus again for the first time. At least that's how it felt for me when a kindly retired minister affirmed my questions about old doctrinal positions. Actually I don't remember much of what he said, but I remember the tea he served and the twinkle in his eye.

That's how it felt when numerous friends, colleagues and strangers over the years, even some whose expressions at first made me shiver – when they all gave me a new impression of Jesus. Their names or faces maybe far too many to remember, but the impression of love upon my heart and mind and soul and strength I will not soon forget.

Now I've only told you these stories about me, because I believe we reach out best when we sympathize with others. We tell our stories and listen to others and somewhere in the midst of it all find a way into the gospel. We don't need to know all the details. We don't need to have all the answers. We just need those experiences at work and in our families that shake us; questions about nation or religion that dishearten us; beauties of nature and relationships that overwhelm us; brief moments once in a great while when we're able to take off the tiles of life and let down enough to feel the power of love that transforms us.

Love is patient. Isn't it beautiful? Love is kind, not envious or boastful, arrogant or rudely insistent. Didn't Ken read it beautifully? We may think we have all theological knowledge to explain great mysteries, Paul writes; or a beautiful body like this building to boast about; even faithful works that move mountains of need ... but if we don't have love we have nothing. You know we often hear these words read at weddings or funerals. And that's fine, but Paul's talking about life everyday. And you know what's long been about the most meaningful part of that beautiful passage? Not once is Jesus, God, the Spirit ever mentioned. And yet we know God abides when that kind of love abounds. Then we will know Jesus fully as we have been fully known.

Then we'll talk as we did in Bible Beginnings last week about how a whole new world of faith opened up when a minister some decades ago encouraged us to really ask questions of the Bible, like what was really going on back then? Then we will read books together like Marcus Borg or Barbara Brown Taylor and we see God from a whole new angle and with passion or choked up words, we say if only I would have known this so long ago, my life would have been different. Then, every day people come here for AA, or bring their children to lay on our mats of care. They find a way in for TOPS or sip-n-stitch; to paint or to be with hospital chaplains from all over Michigan and Indiana. Then we go to gather for circles or to volunteer or to make a difference with MACS or Mobile Meals. And we meet so many others who need to God loves them, and a bit about how to love their neighbors and maybe even how to find a way in here.

So I began a blog this week. And as someone told me it was the very same day NPR ran a story about Pope Benedict encouraging all priests to have a blog! Apparently he said if Jesus were here today, he would blog. For the record, I'm not taking orders from the pope! And it's just funny, because this person said "Yeah, but you'll never see the pope doing it!" It's just another way to reach out; to have the same kinds of conversations we have in other ways. And after I posted three people commented! It's a start! I'm going for a few more so help me out here! Two comments from members and best I could tell, maybe one from someone not associated with our church. It's all about coming to Jesus as we've considered today.

And one church member wrote: "What makes me feel welcome and fed is the love, care and concern that radiates from the Church, whether you're a member or not, whether you believe exactly the same stuff or not, etc. I think too often Church has been a vehicle for exclusion

rather than inclusion and brainwashing versus brain/spirit-opening. I thank God that I found a warm place to call home.”

Luke tells us the power to heal was with Jesus that day. And the person who had been paralyzed, went home glorifying God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.