

to offer that. He had something greater to give. But since everyone was questioning him, Jesus said, “Tell you what, I’ll do both, just so we’re clear about who I am and what kind of blessing I’m offering.” So Jesus forgave the man’s sins and then he empowered him to walk again.

Perhaps back then, people thought the man’s paralysis had been caused by sin. We don’t believe that anymore. But we still believe that forgiveness is key to a life of discipleship because as humans, we are all sinners. All of us are in need of a spiritual physician to bring us back to wholeness. For us, one of the most sensible and powerful definitions of sin is anything that separates us from God. So when Jesus says, “your sins are forgiven,” he banishes everything that tries to come between us and God. He shores up the connection between us and God, drawing us closer and closer. His forgiveness brings us back into communion with God. He drives out those voices and memories, worries and pains, fears and inadequacies that try to separate us from God. His forgiveness sets us free to repair our relationships, to work toward equity, and to forgive others. Jesus, fully human and fully God, offers those gifts in response to faith, but especially to build and nurture it, too.

Christ offers all those gifts when people bring faith to help others. Just like those friends did by surrounding the paralyzed man who was suffering, struggling. When we serve others and help friends and care for the vulnerable, we probably will not hear Jesus declare out loud, “your sins are forgiven” to us or anyone else. But we likely will feel the burden among us ease. We will feel closer to God, no longer separate from what is holy. We will feel the climb in front of us get easier, especially, we pray, for those having the hardest time. When we bring our faith into our relationships, then we begin to experience the kind of world God intends. Which is a world where people are whole; where no earthly barrier stands in the way of their thriving; where no one suffers unnecessarily and no one has any need to take advantage of another. All because Jesus, which is to say God, is right there, noticing the faith among us, and urging us on in our dogged determination to live with love and compassion.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



January 14, 2024  
Second Sunday after Epiphany  
“Surround Others with Your Faith”  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Mark 2:1-22

Faculty at the University of Virginia published some research with a joking title: “Jack needs Jill to get up the hill.”<sup>1</sup> The researchers prepared heavy backpacks and recruited students to join them at the base of a very steep hill. They asked students to put on the heavy backpacks and then to estimate the steepness of the hill in front of them. Students who stood alone at the base of the hill reported that it was very, very steep. But students who stood at the base of the hill alongside a close friend gave much lower estimates of how steep it was. Nothing else was different, just that there was a friend there with them. The report concluded that social support and friendship are not just nice things to have. The support of others actually changes how we experience ourselves and the world around us.

Friendship and the support of others plays a vital role in the opening story of our scripture passage. Friendship, along with faith, proves even more amazing by the end. Jesus was in the middle of a crowded scene. Word had gotten out that he was teaching folks from his home. I love that detail by the way. Mark implies that he wasn’t just at *someone’s* home, Mark says he was at *home*. Like maybe this was Jesus’ own house, packed to the gills with people hanging on his every word, trying to soak up what he had to say. I imagine a lot of whispers, folks angling for a good spot to see Jesus. And the place was so full, there was no room for anyone else to fit.

Somewhere in town, a group of friends got word that Jesus was at home. And that he was teaching and entertaining guests. This group didn’t rush to his house themselves to check out what was going on. The first thing they thought to do was to bring their friend, who had been suffering, to Jesus. Surely their friend had been struggling for a long time. Maybe an injury had stolen his capacity to walk. Maybe it had been a bad, unexplained illness. Whatever had happened to him, they knew his isolation; they had been sharing in his sadness and his wish to regain an ability to walk. And

1 “Jack needs Jill to get up the hill: Perceptions affected by friendship,” UVA Magazine, Fall 2009, [https://uvamagazine.org/articles/jack\\_needs\\_jill\\_to\\_get\\_up\\_the\\_hill](https://uvamagazine.org/articles/jack_needs_jill_to_get_up_the_hill)  
2 Qtd in William C. Placher, Mark (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 43.  
3 Qtd in William C. Placher, Mark (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 43.

so they thought, perhaps this Jesus, the healer, was the answer to helping their friend. Maybe this prophet could touch him and allow him to walk away on his own two feet. They hoped against hope that Jesus could help. So they scooped up their friend, mat and all, and headed to Jesus' house.

When the friends showed up, they couldn't even push the door open to get inside. But these folks seemed to believe that there was a way. And that it was worth finding. It was worth it to their friend. And it was worth it because of who Jesus was, what they had heard he was about. There must have been a ringleader among the friends who looked around, looked up, started to smile, and said, "hey guys, here's what we're gonna do."

First one, then another, shinnied up the side of the house. They used their hands and maybe some tools, to dig through the roof. A patch of light emerged as they got through the layers of roof, and pushed into the room below. They called on bystanders to help hoist their friend up high. "Careful, don't jostle him." And finally, down went their friend and his mat into the room, perhaps mosh-pit style, until he could be safely lowered onto the ground. Jesus took in the whole scene: the destruction of his roof, the group of friends dangling through the hole in the ceiling, and the man at his feet. What he saw in all of it was faith. But not, we don't think, faith in the man on the mat. But faith in that group of friends. In those people who surrounded the one they loved with hope and trust and compassion. They took a risk, for him. They gave of themselves, on his behalf. Jesus noticed. And because of it, he offered grace and restoration to the man. Not because of the man's faith, but because of theirs.

As we get going in Mark's story, Jesus gathered disciples around him and started to show them what it meant to follow him. Then, and now, in following Jesus: faith matters. But it's what you do with faith, how you use it, that is key. Faith is not something to possess, or to gain. It is especially something to use on behalf of others. Disciples offer friendship and compassion to those who are most vulnerable. We stand at the base of the hill together. We bring our faith and enfold those who are struggling. And God meets us there.

What exactly does 'faith' mean here? Theodore Jennings says it means "this holy impatience, this all out, go for broke determination that the lame be made to walk."<sup>2</sup> Faith is dogged determination to put the world right. Here, that even meant a lack of regard for property or the appropriate way of doing things; they destroyed the house after all. But Jesus didn't let on that he had any problem with that. He noticed these people acting on a deep sense of hope and trust, a sense of service and love. What Jesus saw in the friends and saw them doing, he blessed. They were doing what

the research at UVA commends: lightening the load for their companion; easing their friend's burden by going alongside him. Jesus told us that the faith of those friends was powerful enough to transform the world. Like the ancient theologian Cyril of Jerusalem said, "some have been saved by others believing."<sup>3</sup> Faith may not be so much about us and God, individually; but rather about all of us and God, together. Which is encouraging for the times we ourselves struggle to trust and believe that the good news is really real. In those times, we can depend on the faith of our community, which means both strong belief and especially, strong actions.

After his encounter in the home, Jesus showed his faith in a similar way as the friends did. But, like always, Jesus set an even higher example. He did not bring his faith in support of his friends or people like himself. He brought his faith to bear for those he probably didn't like that much; some unsavory characters. Mark says Jesus sat down to a pot of stew and a loaf of bread with the most despised people in his neighborhood: tax collectors and sinners. Jesus often ministered to the poor and the outcast, which has some overlap with this group. But some of these people at dinner may have been well-off, even as they were also scoundrels. Tax collectors gathered money on behalf of the empire, and they also demanded extra to line their own pockets. These folks' didn't suffer physically. But they suffered because they were bound to a system of injustice that took advantage of people and served only those in power; it made them despised members of society. Jesus said to these people, "even you matter. I will bring my faith, my hope, my good news, to surround you. I will allow my grace to touch you, and just maybe, there will be a transformation."

When people bring faith to bear in relationships, wellness and wholeness become possible. Whether in friendships, among rivals, between enemies, or with neighbors, when we face the hill together, the road which felt very steep, flattens out a bit. The very act of coming alongside another person with hope and trust, with a commitment to their wholeness, is transformative. When we do that, or when someone does that for us, God shows up. And when God shows up, anything is possible; change is probable; and love is certain.

Back inside the home, this was what Jesus tried to tell the scribes when he said to the man, "your sins are forgiven." They answered back, "only God can forgive sins." And Jesus "exactly right! Only God can forgive sins, and indeed, I am that God, present right here with you." Presumably at that time, all sorts of prophets, fortune tellers and magicians had the knack for healing those who could not walk. So even though a physical healing seemed like the logical conclusion to this event, at first, Jesus didn't bother