

April 22 – Man Through the Roof – Stretcher Bearers

Luke 5:17-26

For me, in many ways, this is the most amazing of the healing stories we have from Jesus' ministry. It shares some about the awesome grace of God and, through this story, we learn about the work God asks each of us to do. Luke makes it clear that Jesus is surrounded by Pharisees and teachers of the law. This is the first time that the Pharisees are mentioned in Luke. We do not know why they are present. Luke clearly states that Jesus is teaching. Are they there to hear what he had to say, this new teacher, to see if his teaching is sound? Are they already opposed to him? We do not know. Luke also says that the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal. So when the roof is opened up and the man is lowered all would assume that Jesus will heal him as he has done for others. Instead, Jesus pronounces that his sins are forgiven. This sets up a confrontation with the leaders. They are thinking blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins and, in saying your sins are forgiven, Jesus is putting himself on the same level as God. Jesus responds to their unspoken questions by asking them a question, "Is it easier to say your sins are forgiven or to heal someone?" Of course we know the answer. One is verifiable the other is not so any of us can say to another, "Your sins are forgiven." No one can prove whether or not they are. To heal, that is another matter. Jesus, this time, uses healing as proof that if one can heal they also have the power to forgive. The story behind the story is that people at this time believed that illness was caused by sin. Jesus never challenges that notion, but instead uses it to his advantage. If the paralysis was from sin then he could only be healed if his sins were forgiven.

The paralyzed man has done nothing to deserve healing. He is carried there by his friends. It is their faith in Jesus, their persistence in doing all that was necessary to get him to Jesus that allowed the man to be healed. He did not ask for forgiveness, he did not proclaim faith in Jesus. Yet he was healed. This story is often shared to show the love of God who loves and forgives us without prior conditions. The story ends with all amazed, saying they had never seen anything like that.

We are going to spend most of our time on those who brought the man to Jesus but first I want to spend a few moments on the one who was carried. He, for some of us,

had the hardest task. He had to be willing to be vulnerable and to receive help. I sometimes wish we knew a little more about the events leading up to this critical moment in his life. Did he learn about Jesus and then beg his friends to help him get there so he could be healed? Possibly. But since he is presented as being so passive, I think it might have happened this way. His friends are standing around when one of them mentions the teacher and healer Jesus is in town. Someone shares how nice it would be if their friend could be healed by Jesus. Then, a look passes between them and they say, almost as one, "Let's take him to Jesus!" They rush to his room, and without even asking permission, pick him up and start towards where Jesus was teaching. Finding the crowds so dense that they could not get there, they set their friend down for a moment, defeated. They were about to apologize for not being able to help him see Jesus when one of them says, "The roof!" They pick him up, clamber up the outside stairway and start throwing tiles aside, opening a hole to let him in. Then they lower him down to the feet of Jesus. Do you realize how absolutely vulnerable he would be? What if everyone laughed at his friends and Jesus scolded them for interrupting? What would he do? It's not as if he could get up and leave. Would his friends pull him back up, go around to get him, or just leave him? It was their idea but he was the one at risk.

We all know those moments of vulnerability, those time we need help. We are called to be carried. Sometimes healing can't happen if we are not able and willing to be helped. Yes, we are vulnerable. Yes, we are not in control. But sometimes that is just what God needs from us, to let go and trust others. We all need to be helped and not feel awkward when it comes our way. Just as the man was healed when he let friends take care of him, so too healing and new direction can sometimes happen in our lives only when we are willing to receive.

I think of the person who was trying to make it living alone after their spouse died. He was an independent person who had never asked for help from anyone and wasn't about to now. He didn't know much about cooking or cleaning so you can imagine the direction things were taking. Finally a group of friends showed up one day. They told him, didn't ask, that they were there to clean up. They also left him with food

in the fridge. One of them came back the next day and said, "Either you get some help or we will work with your family to move you!" He grumbled and complained about them being busybodies. He didn't need them to clean his house, give him food or tell him what to do, but he did hire a cleaning person and started going out to eat one meal a day. The change in his health and demeanor was amazing. He was healed through friends. I am sure you can think of other examples.

What this means is that we are all called to be stretcher-bearers at times. We need to be there for others and know that through our actions healing can take place. So I see there being three things to being a stretcher-bearer.

First of all you need to see the needs of those around you. Sometimes the needs are obvious, like the man in the story who was paralyzed. Other times they are more subtle and if we are not attentive, we can miss them. For example, a friend misses attending several meetings of your club. They always have a good excuse. Are those excuses legitimate or are they masking other issues? Sometimes you have to ask questions, listen quietly, and discern to really see the need.

Second, you have to ask yourself, "Can I do anything about their problem?" One of the hardest things to have to admit to ourselves is that we can't solve every problem that we see. And sometimes helping with one issue is actually not helping but enabling them to stay stuck in a bad situation instead of making the hard decisions that will allow them to go forward.

Assuming we see the need and it is legitimate and something we can help with, to be a stretcher-bearer means being willing to pitch in and help. Again, we can't help everyone with every problem. We all have to keep boundaries but many of us just tsk tsk about things instead of pausing to pray and say, "God, is there something for me to do?" Each of us is sometimes called upon to be there for others. I think of the four men with their friend. It was challenging, what they did. They had to overcome obstacles. And yet they did it. Are there people we know that we should be helping, being a stretcher-bearer for them? The tasks might be minimal, taking them some soup, to a major commitment of time, yet something we could give if we wanted to. I believe all of

us are called to be agents of help to others. Again not every person and every situation, but faithfulness is more than our getting right with God. Faithfulness is being God's agent of love and compassion for others.

Think about what happened that day. The friends trusted that Jesus would bless their efforts. They became agents of healing and grace for their friend. Sometimes the way people come to faith, to new life, to forgiveness is through our prayers, our actions and our compassion. Sometimes the way people find healing is through us. To me, that is one of the most amazing and compelling things of our faith. Jesus asks us to partner with him in the task of helping, healing and compassion. Stretcher bearing should never be seen as a burden, even if it takes time and effort, but a joy. We are able to be God's agents of blessing.

I think of one of our own. Dave White had recently joined this congregation when he was diagnosed with cancer. We did what we always do as a church. We first of all gave him a prayer quilt. Then people stopped by to see him. Food was delivered and some needs around his place were taken care of. We all thought that he would, if not recover, at least have some time left. From the diagnosis, to surgery to his passing was about four months. Yet, here is what stretcher bearing did. Dave had dealt with a lot of pain in his personal life so he was a bit unwilling to be open to others. In our caring about him he felt love that he had forgotten was there. I saw him often and he would always mention the prayer quilt, the kindness of the church and then tear up and say, "I don't know why they are doing this?" To which I replied, "Because we love you." He witnessed to our affection to his brother and wife when they came to take care of him at the end. A man who could have ended his life feeling a bit angry at life and people died feeling loved and cared about. That is why we are called to be stretcher bearers.

Each of us at times needs to be carried. May we be willing and gracious when that happens. Each of us is called upon to be a stretcher-bearer. Open our eyes to the needs and give us the courage and strength to help. For we might be God's agents of healing, hope and blessing.