

## Faith and Crumbling Ceilings

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Mark 2:1-12

Tonight I start with a question. The question was sparked in my mind by something I read recently written by Rev Reggie Weaver. The question is – what do we expect when we gather to worship? Maybe I'm wrong but sometimes I wonder if we gather because we think it will make us better people. Or because we will learn some moral truth or even because the church is a good place to connect with other folks. These are not bad things, of course. But when we gather, do we expect something powerful and holy to happen?

Well, in our text tonight, the crowd that had gathered around Jesus was certainly hoping for something powerful to happen. They didn't know for sure who he was but they had heard some things: "Grew up down the street." "Fine preacher. Speaks with authority." "I heard he healed a few people." And so with great expectation the people flocked to the home where Jesus was teaching. So many came that heads were squished together in window openings, bodies pressed into doorways. They were packed in shoulder to shoulder, wall to wall.

And then it happened that as words fell from Jesus' mouth little flecks of dust began to fall from the ceiling. Then tiles. Then long splinters of wood and big, slate shingles...until finally, a big gaping hole. Chunks of crumbled roof and ceiling were now a pile of rubble around Jesus as a paralyzed man, his mat swaying ever so slightly descended, with the help of four friends, and landed at Jesus' feet. Philip Yancey remembers that the first time he heard the story of what these four friends did, his destructive impulses were aroused. Imagine a Sunday school story that encourages destruction; that applauds dismantling of a roof!

Though destruction of course isn't the point of the story, it does speak to the creativity and the compassion of the paralyzed man's friends. And it speaks to something else, which is one of the central themes of this passage. It speaks to faith. The New Testament scholar, Dale Brunner, says that faith lives with one great compulsion – to get into the presence of Jesus. He believes that Mark's details about the destruction of the roof are so important because they tell us that faith is bold, insistent, and sometimes seemingly indifferent to social norms. Brunner puts in parenthesis (deroofting is antisocial). I agree!

Friends, faith lives with one great compulsion – to get into the presence of Jesus. That's, I think, why we've gathered here together tonight. To get before Jesus. For it's true that no matter who we are, no matter how we got here, no matter what kind of illness or injury or paralysis we may have – it may be the paralysis of fear or grief or shame or feelings of not measuring up. Jesus sees us here tonight and Jesus knows exactly what we need.

You know, what's surprising about this story is that at first blush Jesus doesn't seem to give the paralyzed man the right thing. The poor man finally gets in front of Jesus and what happens? Jesus says, "*your sins are forgiven*". The man must have thought, "OK, but what about my legs?!" But here's what's really happening – a man, a person, who like us is helpless on his own to move toward God, discovers that God has already moved toward him and he's already been made completely right with his Maker. Not because he kept the law or even promised to keep the law. Not because he measured up or knew his catechism or attended night church. No. The man is put right, simply, on the basis of faith, and surprisingly not just his faith but the faith of his little company of friends. Mark says, "*When Jesus saw their faith he said to the man, 'Son,*

*your sins are forgiven.*” This is so important. What it says is that my faith isn’t just a personal or private matter. My faith has an impact on you. Your faith has an impact on me and on the lives and faith of others. I think Jesus is pointing to one of the church’s highest callings, one of the most important things we do as God’s beloved people – and that is to carry others by faith into the presence of Jesus – through prayer and acts of kindness and compassion. And to keep carrying them, even when it seems there are insurmountable barriers, and to not give up.

Many years ago, Fred Craddock, a great southern preacher, who has since passed away, told a group of pastors gathered with him a moving story about his dad. Craddock explained how, when he was little boy, his mother was always the one who took him and his siblings to Sunday school and to church; his father never went to church. Dad always complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would come over to the house, and Fred’s dad would say, "I know what the church wants. The church doesn’t care about me. The church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn’t that the name of the game? Another name, another pledge." That’s what Fred’s father always said.

When the revival came to town each summer, the pastor would bring the evangelist over to Fred’s house to try to get Fred’s dad saved. And every time, his dad would say the same thing. “Another name, another pledge—that’s all they want.” “And every time,” Fred explained, “my mother would be pacing in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt.” But every time, his father would say it, “The church doesn’t care about me. The church just wants another name, another pledge.” Fred said, “I guess I heard it a thousand times.” But one time Fred’s father didn’t say it. He was in the veteran’s hospital, down to 73 pounds. They’d taken out his throat, and ... put in a metal tube, after radiation burned him to pieces. “I flew in to see him,” Fred shared. “He couldn’t speak, couldn’t eat. I looked around the hospital room: Potted plants and cut flowers packed all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep stood beside his bed. And even on that tray where they put food, if you can eat, was a flower. And all the flowers, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.” “My father saw me read a card,” Fred said. “He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, “Fred said, “I would not tell you this story.” He wrote: ‘In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.’” Fred said, "What is your story, Daddy?" He wrote, "I was wrong."

Tonight we are not here to generate names or pledges or to simply rehearse rules to live by. Tonight our faith, no matter how small, has propelled us into the presence of Jesus – who after meeting the paralyzed man’s deepest need said, “I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” And the man got up, took up his mat and went home.

Tonight we expect something powerful and holy to happen. It may or may not look like a paralyzed man picking up his mat and going home. But, without a doubt tonight what power and holiness looks like is God’s people gathered in this place, each with a kernel of faith; faith that Jesus went the way of the cross to forgive all our sins and to one day heal all our diseases. Faith that our crucified Lord is at the right hand of the Father and is praying for us there. Faith that as we carry ourselves and others into his presence, we are seen and heard and forgiven and promised new life and new hope. That’s what we can expect. Thanks be to God. Amen