

Luke 5:17-26

Extreme Makeover

The sermon title comes from one of those home redo shows on TV. Our passage has the roof torn out and so, requires fixing up; but also the man on the bed needs making over. I encourage you to read this chapter soon and ponder its meaning, for in it are many people being remade, one right after another: Simon Peter; a leper- made clean; Levi the tax-collector, who is called to follow; the “sinners” who dine with Jesus and hear a word of approval; and this man and his friends. And maybe we will see how we can be made over as we consider this passage and the Lord who forgives and heals.

On occasion I find in my inbox articles and videos- some of them sent by you- that inspire, or that display the beauty of nature, or that demonstrate the whimsy of the human condition. My favorite of the most recent videos is a humorous one of a father showing his daughter the team-building exercise in which one person catches another. You know it, where coworkers are encouraged to fall backward without looking, trusting that someone is there to catch them. The idea of course is to learn that we are all in this together. Well, the father goes over the process with his young daughter, moving into position behind her, and then he says, “Now, you fall and I’ll catch you.” And she is all in- excited to be part of it.

She says, “OK,” and falls face first right into the floor! Even if she didn’t quite understand the rules; she absolutely trusted her dad, and believed in his good heart and his strong arms for catching.

I think it must be that way for this paralyzed man and his friends. They trusted Jesus would catch the man and heal him. And they are perfectly willing to rip open the roof of someone else’s house and drop him in. It is a bold, desperate act, but Jesus often commends those who act boldly, who meet their own desperate situations with faith. And sure enough, Jesus “saw their faith,” and responded with healing- and the big surprise in the story- with forgiveness.

But the question for me is this, what was it about their faith made Jesus wish to heal and forgive the man? What aspect of their faith does Jesus approve of: was it a faith that believed the teachings of Jesus, or that they trusted him as someone who wouldn’t turn them away, or that they believed he had the power to heal; was theirs a faith that decided there was nowhere else to go, and so, risked it all right here; or was it that Jesus saw in their actions proof of true faith? The kind of faith that brought them to selfless good works: a faith that caused them to show mercy to another person, to act with kindness and without thought for themselves. They come to Jesus carrying the man; how many times had they taken him to the doctor,

to synagogue, anywhere he needed to go? And these aren't servants (that's another Greek word), they aren't family (family members are almost always noted in scripture), they are his friends; and their faith, their attitude to God's love and goodness, causes them to act lovingly. And so, for all the good this man already owed his friends, even more now: he is healed because Jesus saw the humble strength of *their faith*.

Which should make us want to reconsider the meaning behind Jesus offering him forgiveness. How strange, this word, out of nowhere, "Your sins are forgiven." Is Jesus making a point for the sake of the Pharisees present? That is the obvious answer, a declaration that at once asserts his authority and makes the religious officials squirm. We may read this and think that the healing proves the forgiveness. But it doesn't always work that way, there have been people healed who perhaps should never have been forgiven; in the pages of the Bible, miracles had been performed by those who were not divine, nor given that ability and that power by God. And we remember, too, other places in the gospels where the religious leaders would attribute Jesus' healings to trickery or some agreement he had made with the Devil. So, there is something we're missing.

Does Jesus look up and see the hole in the roof and say, “You’re forgiven” for the mess you’ve made in this house? Maybe in a good-humored way. Or, “You’re forgiven” for all the effort and trouble you have caused your friends over the years as they cared for you? To force him to understand how beyond the norm are their good deeds on his behalf. Or maybe the answer is somewhere in Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ grumbling, that only God can forgive. Jesus asks which is easier to say, “You are forgiven,” or “Get up and walk”? Were they thinking- and do we think it, as well- that they are both impossible? Here is what I want to propose: that Jesus’ question, “Which is easier,” and the Pharisees’ complaint, “Only God can forgive,” are both red herrings: clues- like in a mystery novel- that may be correct, but that, in fact, may lead us to a wrong solution; or in this case to an incomplete answer.

Consider this, is it really true that only God can forgive? How many times have you forgiven someone for doing you wrong- do you have enough hands and fingers to count them all; and how many times has somebody found it necessary to forgive you- do you have enough hands and fingers? Forgiveness may be divine, as the saying has it, but that only points to how hard it is to do. Truly, forgiveness is the most basic and essential element in every *human relationship*. Without

forgiveness there are no relationships. And so, when Jesus looks at these men lowering down the man through the roof and sees their faith, and when he sees this man lying there and surrounded by friendship and kindness, he says, “Your sins are forgiven.” It is a word of relationship, that binds these persons together. Look, how often had one of the friends forced himself to forgive the inconvenience of the paralyzed friend? His need always intruding on their friendship, calling them up and saying, “I need a lift somewhere” (literally!). Perhaps more than anything else, Jesus’ word of forgiveness was an affirmation of friendship; the power of friendship that overcomes even annoying importunity.

Maybe it’s a little confusing- maybe we intentionally confuse ourselves. We hear forgiveness and think, holiness and evil- at opposite ends of the spectrum. But that’s only a part of it. Maybe the real point, in this scripture and in our lives, is that we should just be done with our hyper-concern over holiness or perfection- which often comes off as “holier than thou” anyway- and instead, simply forgive and be forgiven; to start over with a clean slate; to admit that we’re human, after all, and that even the most troublesome of us are worth the effort. “Your sins are forgiven.” If our Lord forgives, it doesn’t mean he does all the forgiving; it is also his command that we forgive one another. And that is how we make relationships.

I am not trying to take what seems an easy story and muck it up- I'm trying to find out place in it. I'm not trying to take God out of the story; I have no wish to make Jesus anything less than the Messiah, who has come with God's message of hope and with God's power to heal and liberate and save. But the story of God, meeting us in the pages of the Bible, and the life and death of our Lord and his teachings, show us that *it's all about people*; and thus we can see that healing and liberation and salvation are all relational; that we are made whole in our connection to others, and that we are freed by the bonds of friendship, and saved by a grace that makes us over, and brings us into an open and forgiven relationship with God and with others who share God's selfless love.

The end of the passage tells us, "Amazement seized them all...and they glorified God and said, we have seen strange things today!" What strange things, do you think? The hole in the roof, the healings, the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees? Or was it this, the kind of faith that Jesus met with such approval, faith that creates relationship and acts for the sake of others? Maybe for too long we have read passages like this and compared Jesus to the Pharisees, when really we should have been comparing the good deeds of honest, humble people- like the

men who carry their friend- to the smug self-righteousness of know-it-all believers: here, the scribes and Pharisees, and in our experience, those who are unwilling to share God's mercy with people who are different in some way; unwilling to forgive or to accept others. But the good news of Jesus is all about people- do we believe that- God reaching down to a world of people that hurt, to heal them and forgive them, and to bring them together into a fellowship of thankfulness and joy, and to a unity of purpose: so that we might pass on kindness to our friends, and thus glorify God; that we might rejoice at the kind of relationships that can bring hope to us all, and peaceableness and healing.