

Stranger Things

Luke 5: 17-26

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By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

This summer several of us from the church (37 people) took a trip to Scotland at the conclusion of the Reformation class, celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was a study abroad adventure to explore the beginnings of the Presbyterian Church. Each morning as we began the day, we would climb aboard the bus on our way to our first destination, and then the tour guide and I would exchange jokes, stories, or words of inspiration. One morning I told the story of two brothers who were known scoundrels in the community. They were dishonest, in trouble with the law, deceitful, and unfaithful. One brother died. The local minister was called upon to officiate at the service. He was conflicted about what to say during the eulogy. The surviving brother approached him during the planning meeting saying, “I’m willing to pay you \$5,000 to do this service but I want you to say that my brother was a “saint.”” So the day of the funeral arrived, the pastor was still conflicted. He rose to his feet for the eulogy and said, “ We all know that this man was a thief and a scoundrel, who lived his life selfishly, seeking his own advantage at the expense of others. But compared to his brother, he was a “saint.””

Clever pastor! Our story in Luke today introduces something new in the unfolding story of the Gospel. Luke wants us to know that, while Jesus is growing in popularity, and increasing numbers of people are following him, there is a complexity to the story that is developing. Opposition is growing, especially among the religious officials. Jesus had caught their attention but not their commitment. By contrast, others were willing to take risks based upon their faith in him.

Years ago I read a book by Dr. Bernie S. Siegel entitled, *Love, Medicine and Miracles*.¹ My best friend was receiving both chemo and radiation treatments for cancer and he told me about the book, and how helpful it was to him. Dr. Bernie Siegel is an oncologist dedicated to his patients and their health. He even shaved his head to identify with patients who were losing their hair during chemotherapy. After years of treating patients he noticed that life expectancy and cancer itself was affected significantly by the attitude and perspective of the patients. Those who had a will to live simply responded better to treatments than those who lacked a will to live.

¹ Siegel, Bernie, *Love Medicine and Miracles*, HarperPerennial; Reissue edition (July 22, 1998)

Determination is a driving force in human life. One memorable line from the book, “There is no sin in dying, everybody dies. The sin is in not living until you die.” The book tells the stories of patients who lived fully and loved deeply right up until their death. Maybe this life of faith, this eternal life we talk about in church, is at least as much about the quality of our lives as it is about the longevity of them. Eternal life is not something that begins at the end of our lives but something that begins right now and is evident in the quality of our lives.

This text in Luke’s Gospel is about the determination of some loyal friends to get their paralyzed friend in front of Jesus. They were not easily discouraged. They had heard about Jesus and some miraculous things he was doing. They saw an opportunity to get their buddy the healing he needed. So someone hatched a plan and four friends each picked up a corner of the stretcher and off they went to see Jesus. I can only imagine what their paralyzed friend must have been feeling at this point. “Where are you guys taking me? Did I ask you to do this? Leave me alone! If I could get off this stretcher I’d choke you!” I have no idea how willing he was to go along with this crazy plan but he was carried forward by their love for him and determination to save him. Then they arrive at the home only to discover they can’t get anywhere near Jesus. The crowds are too large even to get into the house where Jesus is speaking. They are in the “overflow” seating outside. One of the friends must have been an engineer. He looked up at the roof, and through the window, and then hatched a plan to carry their friend up to the roof and lower him down in front of Jesus. Now that’s creativity! Every time we ordain or install ministers of Word and Sacrament, we hear them respond to the question, “Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.” Here are four officers of the church using their energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to get their friend in front of Jesus.

It’s no easy task to get a stretcher up the side of a house onto the roof keeping it level so the poor, paralyzed man doesn’t fall off! I can imagine him saying to his friends, “You’ve got to be kidding me! Take me home! I have no desire to be the center of attention in someone else’s home. Please, guys – don’t do this!” It reminds me of those movies about a bunch of grown men acting like adolescents in Las Vegas. *The Hangover* movie is about a bunch of buddies at a bachelor party in Las Vegas who lose the groom and can’t remember what happened the night before. Except Luke’s story is not about stupidity and intoxication but about love, determination, and faithfulness. These friends move from attention to commitment, from passivity to activity, from complacency to engagement with the Lord of life.

While Jesus is talking, all of the sudden the ceiling begins to drop stuff on the floor in front of him. People begin to think to themselves, "Did I just see some tiles fall?" Soon everyone begins to look up and first there is a hand, and then some face looks through the hole in the roof, and finally the stretcher begins to descend from the roof to the floor in front of Jesus. Can you imagine what the homeowner is thinking at this point? "What the . . . !? I just had that roof fixed last summer!" Jesus looks at the guy on the stretcher and looks back up at his friends on the roof peering down through the now sizeable hole in the ceiling. The text says, "When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.'" "What did he say?," the friends on the roof asked one another. "'Your sins are forgiven you?' Come on, how many sins can a paralyzed guy commit? What do you mean? We came here for you to heal him!" It raises the question about what kind of healing we really need, doesn't it?

But others in the room are thinking something different. "What did he say? What the . . . ?! That's blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins! Who does he think he is? This guy needs to be put in his place!," meaning he should be knocked down off his high-horse. But Jesus, perceiving what was in their minds and hearts, says, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven, or to say stand up and walk?" But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he said to the one paralyzed, 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them."

There are many ways to read ourselves into this story. You may feel like someone who has been paralyzed by life, by things you fear, or by your past. You may have adopted a victim mentality, blaming everyone around you for what is wrong with your life. And you may hear the Lord saying to you this morning, "Stand up! Get your legs under you and move forward. You don't need to lie on that stretcher for the rest of your life. Get up and get moving!" Or you may find yourself wondering about forgiveness. What is the connection between illness and forgiveness? Does my physical health have anything to do with my spiritual health? Can Jesus actually provide a cure for what I'm struggling with? Is there really any escape from the past? How do I let my future bury the past rather than continuing to allow my past to bury my future?

But what really interests me this morning is when he saw "their faith." It was then that Jesus interceded. It raises the question for me about the value of being with others in the community

of faith. It wasn't the faith of the man on the stretcher that won the day. It was the faith of his friends. When we can no longer stand up ourselves, do we have enough friends to carry us? Is there some group of people you can point to and say, "their faith" helped carry me here?

Donald Anderson was the executive director of the Ecumenical Center for Religion and Health in San Antonio, Texas. He tells of receiving instructions from his board to investigate the Hospice movement years ago, as it was just beginning to develop in many communities. As many of you know, hospice provides palliative care for those who are terminally ill; providing comfort from pain and assistance to those who are dying so that, in many cases, they can remain at home during the last weeks of their lives.

Mr. Anderson visited Hill Haven Hospice, a thirty-three bed institutional hospice program. He interviewed the chaplain on a Tuesday morning and learned that eight of their 33 patients had died over the previous weekend. Knowing what a close knit family of caretakers and care receivers they were, the chaplain was asked how so many deaths would effect the staff. He replied it was tough and then he described the story of one patient's death in particular.

A woman who had been in their care for some time had a visit from her teenage son on Saturday afternoon. The staff said it must have been a great visit because they heard laughter and cheery conversation coming from the room. At noon the boy said, "I'm going to have lunch with some friends, I'll be back later mom." After he left, the patient called her favorite nurse and said, "I think this may be it, I may be dying." The nurse checked her vital signs and replied honestly, "It's possible that you are dying." Then the patient said to her nurse friend, "Will you hold me? I think if you hold me, I can do this well." So the nurse climbed into the bed and cradled the emaciated little body in her arms – and held her into eternity.

Donald Anderson asked the chaplain, "What about the nurse? What did that do to her?" He replied that she had taken four days off to go to the mountains to think and feel and decide whether to come back to work again. As hard as it is, you learn in a place like that that caring hurts, but . . ."when you really care, you offer something special, and become something special yourself."

Is this not who we are and what we are supposed to be for one another? Your faith carries me

and my faith carries you. And it is when the Lord saw “their faith”, yours and mine, that things really began to happen. Maybe we are supposed to carry one another into eternity. That is what this whole stewardship thing is about. It’s about much more than your contribution to the budget. How might you use your energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to pick up the corner of some stretcher and help carry it to a place where the Lord can provide healing? Maybe it’s your prayers. Maybe it’s a phone call or a visit or signing a card in the courtyard for someone in the hospital. Maybe it’s teaching in the Sunday school or the Nursery School or in Conversational English, or singing in the choir, or serving on the mission committee, or preparing the elements for communion. We are carrying one another into eternity and it is when we are in this together, the Lord sees “their faith, or “our faith.” It’s plural. We must move from attention to this Lord toward commitment, from passivity to activity, from complacency to engagement with the Lord of life.

The story concludes by those present that day saying, “We have seen strange things today.” We will see even “stranger things” than that when we step out in faith and reach out in love to those who are hurting and paralyzed by life. Join the effort and pick up a corner of a stretcher. Offer something special and you may just become something special yourself. Thanks be to God.