Our Greatest Need

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Mark 2:1-12

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Wynton Marsalis is one of the most recognizable jazz musicians of the modern era and perhaps the premier jazz trumpeter of all time. He was playing one night at a jazz concert. It was the end of the performance and Marsalis was playing a jazz version of a 1930s song, *I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You*. At a poignant moment near the end of the song, Marsalis paused for an instant before finishing the song. Then, it happened. Somebody’s cell phone went off. It was loud enough for everyone to hear—the mood broken by a silly ringtone song.

Marsalis, ever the improviser, began playing the ringtone melody. He played it several times in various modulations and key changes. The audience was now back in the mood and enraptured with his improvisation. Marsalis found his way back from the cell phone melody to the original song, and closed it out with a flourish. The audience erupted in wild applause. Marsalis had successfully woven the ringtone melody into the song.

How well do you handle interruptions? Do interruptions annoy you or do you see them as opportunities in life?

Henri Nouwen was a young professor at Notre Dame. He was walking across campus one day with a much older, esteemed colleague. Henri asked this seasoned professor how he handled interruptions from students and administrators. The older professor told him, “You know…my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.” From that day forward, Nouwen writes, he began to treat interruptions as his life’s work.

I marvel at how well Jesus handles interruptions. Take the story I read earlier from Mark 2. Jesus’ popularity has been surging. The house where he is teaching is overflowing with curiosity seekers and would be disciples.

Four men carry a friend on a stretcher across town for an audience with Jesus. They have heard reports about this miracle worker and come seeking a cure. But they can’t make it past the front door. What to do next?
Most first century homes came equipped with an outside staircase leading to the roof. People would evacuate their homes in the heat of the summer and sleep on the roof. These few men devise a plan to climb the back staircase, peel back the thatched roof and lower their friend into the house. Where there’s a will, there’s a way!

I’m trying to imagine the scene from Jesus’ point of view. People are packed solid in the living room like sardines. They hear commotion overhead…little flecks of dust drift down from the ceiling…a gaping hole appears…a shaft of sunlight baths the room in light…a paralyzed man on a stretcher is lowered by ropes into Jesus’ presence.

I’ve been interrupted in preaching plenty of times, but never this way. Jesus doesn’t act the least bit flustered. He seems appreciative of their perseverance and ingenuity. He likes their moxie.

This is the point in the story where Mark tells us, “When Jesus saw their faith” (2:5). Circle this phrase. It’s central to the story. When Jesus locks eyes with this paralytic he announces, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5).

Let’s go back to the four guys on the roof. Given the ruckus, I can imagine one saying to the others, “What did he say?” He said, “Your sins are forgiven.”

“Oh, great; forgiveness is nice. But anyone with two eyes can see that something else is needed here. We didn’t bring our buddy all this way so that Jesus could pronounce forgiveness over him.”

This is the point in the story where the Scribes and Pharisees get into the act. Time and again they serve as Jesus’ nemesis. They take issue with Jesus’ promise of forgiveness. Only God has the prerogative the forgive sins. “This is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (2:7).

Jesus is able to read their minds. In good rabbinical fashion, he answers their question with a question, “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’” (2:9).

I’ve been debating this “which-is-easier” question all week. Initially, I thought it was easier to pronounce forgiveness over the man. But given how much controversy ensues as a result, now I’m not so sure. Maybe it
would have been easier to pronounce healing over the man and be done with it.

It’s a trick question, no doubt. Jesus answers his own inquiry, “‘But so that you will know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…’ He said to the paralytic, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home’” (2:11). So, the man in question gets up and walks toward home.

Jesus often refers to himself with the cryptic phrase “Son of Man.” It’s his preferred self-designation. This “Son of Man” title originates from the ancient prophecy of Daniel: “I looked and there was one like the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. He was given authority, glory and power over all people…” (7:13-14).

People who encounter Jesus in the gospels often comment about his authority. He pronounces forgiveness with authority. He heals with authority. Jesus commands people’s respect. People walk out of the house that day saying to each other, “We have never seen anything quite like this!” (2:12).

Our story unfolds like a straightforward healing story. But, in the middle, Jesus breaks it off to pronounce forgiveness over a man. Forgiveness is sandwiched between two healing stories.

The first healing is obvious—a paralyzed man is able to walk again. But the other healing is less obvious—a man is healed by forgiveness. Jesus knows that what is wrong with people doesn’t always show up on x-rays.

Obviously, this man in question needs bodily healing. But he also requires spiritual healing. Jesus wants to make this man whole in body and soul. That’s what the word salvation means—wholeness.

The paralytic doesn’t come right out and ask Jesus for forgiveness. When he’s lowered into Jesus’ presence, he doesn’t plead, “I want to be forgiven.” But Jesus can recognize his inarticulate yearnings to be made whole. “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Son is a term of endearment. “My son, your sins are forgiven.”

Our greatest need is not for creature comforts or material prosperity. We fall over ourselves to win the brass ring and climb the corporate ladder.
Yet, sooner or later, we find that possessions and accomplishments will not satisfy the deep longing of our hearts.

Our greatest need is not happiness. Parents routinely tell me, “I just want my kids to be happy.” While I appreciate the sentiment, there are more important pursuits than happiness.

Our greatest need is forgiveness. We need our sins forgiven. We need a right relationship with God. If sins are keeping us from God, we need our sins forgiven.

You can’t be serious, some of you might say. In a day and age when we have no use any longer for sin and judgment, you mean to tell me our greatest need is forgiveness? That’s what I’m saying! Even as we expunge sin and guilt from our vocabulary, we know something is wrong with us we cannot fix ourselves.

The longer I am in ministry, the more I recognize our greatest need is forgiveness. We need forgiveness in family and friendship. Otherwise, there is no way to repair broken relationships. We need forgiveness with God. We need Jesus to remedy this problem of crippling guilt and debilitating shame.

But here’s the cool thing. Our greatest need is also God’s greatest gift. The heart of the cross is forgiveness. God deals decisively with the rupture caused by human sin.

There is no need for you to harbor the thought that God is really upset and displeased with you. The word Jesus uses in our story for forgiveness means to send away. God has sent our sins far away. He has sent our sins packing. God deals decisively on the cross with our need for forgiveness.

So, what are we to do? Here’s the so-what portion of this sermon. We can receive this gift of salvation through faith. Faith, as I said last Sunday equates to trust—simple trust. When Jesus saw faith in these men, it became the impetus for Jesus to heal the man’s body and restore his soul.

Have you ever made a conscious decision to entrust your life to Jesus? Have you ever received God’s gift of salvation? You can entrust yourself to the one who says, “Son [daughter], your sins are forgiven.”

If our greatest need had been health, God would have sent us a doctor. If our greatest need had been laughter, God would have sent us a comedian. If our greatest needs had been for political stability, God would
have sent us a legislator. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent us a Savior.

**THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS**

But so that you will know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins… 2.11