

Enthusied for Caring: “The Faith of Friends”

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Text: Mark 2: 1 - 12

Rev. Peter Coutts

Of all the stories of Jesus’ healings in the New Testament, to me the healing of the paralytic stands out. After spending a time in ministry around Galilee, Jesus went home – perhaps for a break! But a rumour went out throughout Capernaum: “Jesus is at home!” By this point Jesus was already a man with a mighty reputation for both his teaching and for his miracles, so people descended on the home and crushed into the place. But not everyone who wanted to see him was able to get in. Four men had a paralyzed friend that they desperately wanted Jesus to heal, but there was no way in through the crowd. So they went up on top of the building, and – as the Greek text states literally – “they dug up the roof” and lowered the man down with ropes tied to his stretcher. They were going to get their friend to this healer, one way or another – such was their determination.

Here we find the first intriguing part of the story. We read, “When Jesus saw their faith...” (vs. 5). Not the paralytic’s faith, but the faith of the friends. How odd!! When we recall the many people Jesus engaged with, we are left with the strong impression that it’s my faith that matters. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You must be born again”. To the rich young man Jesus said, “There is still one thing you lack”. Yet here it is the faith of the friends that moved Jesus to act.

What was it about their faith? Perhaps it was in part their belief: what we know in our soul to be true. These four friends believed that Jesus could do something about the paralytic’s condition – so they went to extreme lengths to get him to Jesus. But faith also means “trust”. They trusted Jesus to use that power and extend that help... if they could only get the man to him. Perhaps their nerve impressed Jesus. I mean, think about it. These guys were so determined to get help for their friend they tore the roof off a house! Their compassion and care for their friend prompted them to action. “And Jesus saw their faith” and it was the faith of the caregivers that moved Jesus. The story seems to suggest that Jesus comes alongside and helps his followers in their acts of care and compassion.

One of the great core values of Varsity Acres Church is caring. In other words, there is a fundamental impulse here to be like the friends in our story. We look around our world and we see needs: hurting families, sick friends, people struggling economically, lands torn by tension, famine and war..... and this church feels compassion. We feel moved to do something. We have congregants who act out this story almost literally -- simply by providing a ride so others can come to worship (and I’m glad they stop short of tearing up the roof). We believe that Jesus still has the power to act, and so we pray for people in need. The prayer group here has existed continuously since the beginning days of this congregation.

And we take risks like the friends in the story. The help we have to offer may not be able to make all things right, but we want to try. Will Willimon, one of the best preachers of our age, wrote of this passage: “When by our actions we give evidence of our faith that Jesus has this authority to forgive and heal, miracles can still occur”.

Two stories. The first is from the 1970’s, recounted in the congregation’s history book “Life and Joy”. Don and Mary Ross came to Varsity Acres in 1975 when Mary became the organist. Don had recently become blind and had health issues. Mary wrote, “We now had a wonderful, big family and super support system—the people of VAPC. Every family helped us in some way, and they did it over time.” Mary wrote, Fred Alexander was the epitome of the good elder, always there for us. Gordon Hodgson arranged for Don to take classes at the university law school. Creta McGuire organized a group to read law texts to Don. Irene Martin and Joyce Wytsma provided continual prayer support and friendship. Carol Lowery faithfully joined Don every Thursday to go for a walk with Don and his seeing-eye dog. She always brought muffins. Norma and Len Reeves had the Ross’ over to their home for social occasions. The congregation helped with home maintenance: Bob McGuire did the plumbing, Archie Bothner and Bob Cormack helped with electrical, Pat Miles with the garden. Rod Tomlinson supported Mary through two degrees in social work. The Ross family came to Varsity Acres as a family in crisis due to Don’s health, and this congregation provided every kind of help imaginable for 4 years until Don’s death. What a remarkable story about how core care has been for this congregation.

The second story is new. Jean Morris has called dementia “the plague of the 21st century.” We have a large group of people who have compassion for people suffering from dementia. That care led to the creation of the Side by Side program here. Every Thursday these volunteers gather to create a fun, helpful and meaningful program for our 5 current guests. And it is also a way to offer care the family care givers, providing them with a respite day to rest and recharge. Varsity Acres Church is like the friends of the paralytic man. Your faith prompts you to care, and act on your care.

Another aspect of the story of the friends is risk. These friends took a few risks in their determination to care for the paralytic man. The friends all dropped whatever they were doing in response to the news that Jesus was in town and this could be a one-time-only opportunity for the paralytic. Simply walking away from what they were doing was a risk. They took the lame man, even though there was no guarantee they could get near to Jesus or whether Jesus would help. And they took the risk of backlash for tearing the roof off some family’s house! If I were the homeowner I’m not sure how charitable I would be! Making a commitment to care I think is often fraught with risk. As we consider jumping in and helping we can wonder “what am I getting myself into? How much time will it take? Can I really help and make a difference?” These questions can impede our involvement. But taking the risk to care is acting without having the answers to our cautionary questions. In the story of the paralytic man we read that “Jesus saw their faith.” Perhaps part of what Jesus noticed in seeing their faith was how far they would

go for the sake of the man on the stretcher. The risks they took. And it was what Jesus saw in the caregivers that prompted his response.

And that suggests a third idea...a question to ponder. Might Jesus still come alongside those who are offering care in Jesus name? That he might turn the act of care into something more than what was given in the original act of care by people? Might the act of care we offer become a sacred place where God meets us, where God's spirit encourages us, helps us feel a sense of reward for what we do for the sake of another in need? What an encouragement to our faith that would be. What an encouragement to care more that would be.

To be a people of care is core to the identity of this congregation. That is clear. It's in the stories of this congregation's history. We see it lived out today. In the exercise we conducted at the annual meeting the largest number of posts reflected this sense about ourselves. If we put this priority alongside the story we've explored today, we want to be like the faithful friends. And apparently when the people of God live this way Jesus notices.

This is a strength here. But saying something is a strength doesn't mean we do it perfectly. We don't, but then again no church does. That exercise in February made it clear that you want to build on this strength. That is both worthy and admirable. So part of the process of discerning our future is to figure out what are the next steps for us? How do we improve on what we already do, like our district system for visitation? Stephen Ministry was added in recent years and that's an excellent addition to our capacity to care. But what about new things such as grief support? Or support for families in these challenging times in our society? Are there ways for us to use social media to speed up our response time to emergent needs? These are the kinds of questions we are going to start asking.

So the story of the paralytic man is a story we should embrace as a congregation because we want to be like those friends. To be caring: prompted by our faith, and prompted by the human need we see before us. And Jesus will notice, and who knows how he might help us as we do what is in our heart to do.