

WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOUR?

This is not a parable. I do not mean to imply that parables are unimportant. Sometimes we learn as much from Jesus' stories as we do from the story of Jesus. Because of Jesus' integrity and wisdom, His parables carry truth and reveal the inner principles of life. But from our vantage point, it is all written in The Book, and pretty soon we take it all on the same level. The Prodigal Son, the Rich Young Ruler, the Good Samaritan, the Faithful Centurion, the Gerasene Demoniac – they are all equally real to us. I have to stop and make myself concentrate before I can remember which ones are parables and which ones are real-life encounters.

So whether it matters to you or not, let me remind you that this passage from Mark is not a parable. This is a real-life encounter. In this case, if it *were* a parable, we would never believe it. We would say the story was not realistic. We would suppose that the story was exaggerated to make a point. The bold among us might even try to conclude that this was not one of Jesus' better stories – not quite up to His usual standards as a storyteller. Only, this is not a parable.

It is early in the ministry of Jesus. We are in Capernaum, a town at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum is in Galilee, the region ruled by Herod Antipas – the son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas was not one of those cads who fell in love with his neighbor's wife or his best friend's wife. No, he fell in love with and married Herodias, his brother's wife. Herodias moved from Rome with her daughter, Salome, to live with her new husband, Herod Antipas – “the fox,” as Jesus called him. John the Baptist, you recall, considered Herod Antipas' actions an affront to everything Jews were supposed to believe and stand for, and he said so openly and forcefully: Why is a Jewish King living against all the commandments of Judaism? So Herod Antipas had John arrested and locked up. Later, when his stepdaughter Salome danced too prettily, Herod made a hasty promise, and the result was that John the Baptist was beheaded. Later, this same Salome married another of the sons of Herod the Great – Herod Antipas' half-brother Philip, who ruled the region east and north of Galilee.

So now that we have taken care of the gossip, back to our story. We are in Capernaum, the town Jesus has chosen as headquarters

for His ministry. It is the town nearest the border between Herod's rule and his half-brother Philip's rule. In a few minutes, at a dead run, Jesus could escape from Herod's jurisdiction. We know that Jesus is loving and holy. Sometimes we need to remember that Jesus is also astute – an extremely clever strategist – and not inclined to expect miracles to bail Him out of things He could take care of Himself. He urges His followers to be that way too: “Stay alert. This is hazardous work I'm assigning you. You are going to be like sheep running through a wolf pack, so don't call attention to yourselves. Be as cunning as a snake, inoffensive as a dove.” (Matthew 10:16 interpretation by Eugene H. Peterson in *The Message*.) Upon the death of John the Baptist, Jesus took over the leadership of much of his movement. Since Herod had killed John, Jesus could only assume that eventually His own life would be in jeopardy from the same source.

But things have not developed to that point yet. Jesus is holding a class – a discussion group – in His home at Capernaum. More people have come than were expected. They fill the room, the doorways, and the windows. They surround the house, hoping to hear, or to hear from those who can hear. Perhaps Jesus does not realize how many have gathered beyond His sight. So He goes on teaching.

The rest of the account is wild, spontaneous verve. That is why I remind you that this is not a parable. The thing is delightfully outrageous. Do these friends of the paralytic know Jesus? How do they think He is going to react when they tear up His roof in order to ask Him for a favor? Does anybody repair Jesus' roof afterward? Do you ever imagine Jesus grumbling and mumbling that night, muttering, “It's not enough I have to preach and teach and heal all day. Now I have to spend half the night fixing the roof!” Well, He *is* a carpenter. He knows how. But I do note that there is never again any mention of Jesus teaching out of His own house. Just because He is the Savior does not mean He cannot learn.

Well, I have not come to the heart of it yet, have I? What has gotten into these four friends? Are they in a “devil may care” mood? Are they like high school or college students on an outing? Actually, it can happen to people of most any age. In the right circumstances, people take dares, drop their fears for a while, act and respond in a moment of single-minded enthusiasm – as if the present moment were the only reality that exists. If there is no anger or greed in it, such moments can be magic and wonderful.

So here comes this noise and racket on the roof. Dust and debris start falling down on the people trying to listen to Jesus, and no doubt onto Jesus as well. People cannot get out because of the crowds, any more than the crowds can get in. So there is no help except to tuck your head into your tunic and wait for the dust to settle. Then down comes this pallet with the paralyzed man on it – maybe with ropes lowering it, or maybe with help from the people below. And the friends stick their heads in from the hole in the roof and say, “Oh, hi Jesus. We couldn’t get in through the door, but thought we would tear your roof up, drop in anyway, and ask if you would please help our friend here.”

Mark must have left out some of the details. There must have been some reply: “Thanks a lot, fellas! You could have waited until we were through here. You might have sent a message in to me.” But these are *young* men – Jesus included. I *have* to see the grins, assume the understanding and friendship behind the antics, and see Jesus coming out from under His tunic with a look that says, “Okay, you clowns. You are only acting like I said you should – being as outlandish as children of God ought to be when a friend is in trouble.”

In any case, there is no further mention of the roof. There is no comment about rudeness, no complaint about interrupting the class, no teaching about “patience is a virtue.” The Scripture simply says, “*When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’*” Wow! Talk about knowing your priorities.

Bible Study groups sometimes spend two or three whole evenings working at this correlation between forgiveness and healing. It is clearly the most important principle in the passage, and it is one of the pivotal teachings of Jesus. If we begin to perceive things as Jesus does, it changes our way of understanding everything. In this passage, we are confronted with the meaning of our distance from God – the reality of our alienation from our Creator. It is a condition of life on this planet, and none of us escape the consequences. We are tantalized by the prospect of what we would be like if we were truly forgiven – truly reconciled with God. We are presented with wonderments about Jesus. Who is He really? God alone can forgive sins. God alone has such authority. But Jesus nevertheless does it. The paralyzed man walks out carrying his pallet. Who then *is* Jesus?! Of course, we mouth the familiar phrases and formulas these many centuries later, but those who were there were still trying to figure it out – partly dumfounded, partly elated, partly afraid.

This is an incredible passage. It is not a parable. It is a real-life encounter with Jesus. What comes from it – for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to believe – is amazing indeed. I remind you of that because I do not intend to talk about it this morning. I want to fool around out on the edge and periphery of this passage. It is a lot safer a little further from the center.

So let's forget all about the story of this paralytic for a little while, okay? I was thinking the other day about the times in my life when I have tried to do without God. Have you ever done that on purpose? Some people try to get along without God most of the time. Do not misunderstand – I know there are very few true atheists. Most people believe in God in some fashion or manner. Lots of people believe in God but still want nothing to do with him when it comes to real life. They believe in God – that is, they believe God exists somewhere in some form or another – but they still try to do without God when it comes to their own lives, their own decisions, their own purposes. People can believe in God and still want no friendship with him, no interference in their own affairs, no real or active relationship.

From a Christian perspective, we would have to say that this is the biggest mistake a person can make in this life. It is not the worst crime, from a social or political or cultural point of view, but it is the worst mistake a person can make. It robs us of more love, joy, meaning, purpose, and power than any other single mistake we can make. Of course, it robs everyone around us too. They never get the benefit of who we really are. Nevertheless, sometimes we try to get along without God.

I want to talk this morning about the second biggest mistake we can make: trying to get along without friends. That's hardly a new or surprising insight. "*You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbor as yourself.*" It is the first commandment – and another like unto it. The biggest mistake any of us can make is to try to get along without God. Another mistake, like unto it, is to try to get along without friends. (I think one of these mistakes tends to draw us into the other, though I know many who would disagree with this.) Often I suspect that the worst mistake of all is to "sort of" believe in God and "sort of" have a few friends, because it is almost impossible to recover from such a condition, such a limbo, such a no-man's-land. It is not new except for the details, but today we have vast hordes of people whose only real God is survival and whose only real friend is their computer. If you think Hell is made of fire – guess again.

Hell is made of loneliness. (The actual recipe is two parts loneliness to one part fear. Just ask Satan, or any devil.)

We do not always think of it this way – though I do not know how we keep from it – but Christianity teaches that there is no religion, no theology, no love, no meaning in life *apart from community*. And there is no community without individual friendships. The church has taught this, the Scriptures are full of it, and experience reveals it. Where there are strong friendships, the church thrives. Where friendships are shallow, the church becomes a lifeless form and dead ritual. This very church knows this to be true. Are you letting that infect your perspective and your priorities?

There is no theology, no commitment, no dedication or joy or zeal where there are no friendships. The first thing God does, at every authentic conversion, is give a person a mission for the sake of the community. Moses is sent to free the Israelites from Egypt *and* to bring them back to the mountain to become a Covenant community. Jesus is sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel – to find them *and* to establish them as a New Covenant community. Paul is sent to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Check the conversion stories of Abraham, Jacob, Isaiah, Samuel, Jeremiah, Peter, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, George Fox, your next-door neighbor. It is always the case. Conversion *always* comes with an assignment intended to bless and benefit the community.

The second thing God does, after every authentic conversion, is to start bringing friends. Moses gets Aaron, Caleb, Joshua, Jethro, Miriam. Jesus gets Peter, Andrew, James, John, Mary, Martha – and He is hoping for you. Paul gets Ananias, Barnabas, Silas, Luke, Timothy, Priscilla, Lydia, Onesimus, and the others. First the vocation and then, like unto it, the friends. There is no Christendom without community – and no community without individual friends. Are you letting that infect your perspective and your priorities?

The first thing we think of when we think of Jesus is that He is our Savior – He reconciles us with God. The second thing is like unto it: He calls us into a disciple band – a group of friends. It is the very substance of His ministry. If we try to follow Jesus – turn our lives over to Him and try to walk in His WAY – the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ will bring us friends. We may turn them away, but they will keep coming as long as we try to walk the WAY. And nothing will work right or feel right until we notice – and begin to receive – the friendships that are sent to us.

Can you remember clear back to grade-school days? What was the difference between the kids who had friends and the kids who did not? It was the difference between day and night, right? It was the difference between confidence and insecurity – between happiness and misery. Some things do not change very much over the years.

We do not live in a friendship-oriented culture, and the church has breathed in some of this poisonous atmosphere along with everybody else. That is why churches have been trying to turn into an entertainment industry, and spectator-itis sets in deeper with each new generation. The pressure to succeed, the ways we view marriage, the frequency with which we change jobs, homes, attitudes, and values – *all* work against friendship. We have automatic adulation for self-sufficiency. No Surgeon General warns us of the price to be paid down the road. Nobody puts up signs that say, “This is a non-lonely area.” Lots of people actually say to me with a straight face that they have no time for friendships. We are too busy for God or friends? Friends and God interfere with our plans; use up our precious time and energy; get in the way when we want to be willful or self-centered or start to self-destruct. How thoughtless of them! Remember the big three: life, liberty, and the pursuit of privacy.

“Be fair,” you say. “Remember the other side of the coin?” I do remember it. Some of us turn away because past friends have meant too much. We have lost friends – to time, or distance; to misunderstanding, or accident; to jealousy or stupidity or death. We feel some friends have let us down, or that we let *them* down. It is hard to be perfect in a world like this. For a while, we handle such losses pretty well, maybe. But it hurts. There are no words for how much. Some of us, after it has happened enough times, begin to withdraw. We do not want to hurt or be hurt that badly anymore. We begin to shield, to guard, to keep our distance. It does not happen all at once or with great consistency. But we begin to withdraw, and then shrivel. We prefer loneliness to pain. We try to get along with acquaintances, but not friends – with ideas about God, but not God. Love is the purpose of life, but love hurts and so we try to find a substitute. Idols are safer to worship; they do not call us to be our true selves, or send us into the fray with a Savior who never quits on life or love.

Of course, we try to paint it up with brighter colors. We dedicate ourselves to our work. We decide we are marching to a different drummer. (God only knows how many “different drummers” there are these days.) We consider that we have a different destiny, or we commit ourselves to one of the endless self-help approaches.

In Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* (written in 1867), the hero commits himself to "be myself." One day he visits the lunatic asylum, where he assumes people are "outside themselves." Jesus teaches that *losing* yourself for His sake is the cure. But Ibsen's generation, like ours, had tried to reverse that – claiming that *finding* yourself is the cure. So naturally, our hero Peer Gynt assumes that the insane asylum will be full of people who have lost themselves. Dr. Begriffenfeldt, the Director of the asylum, corrects him: "*Outside themselves? Oh no, you're wrong. It's here that men are most themselves – themselves and nothing but themselves – sailing with outspread sails of self. Each shuts himself in a cask of self, the cask stopped up with a bung of self, and seasoned in a well of self. None has a tear for others' woes, or cares what any other thinks. We are ourselves in thought and voice – ourselves up to the very limit.*"

To be an individual apart from a community is madness.
And our world is full of madness.

Suddenly I want to come back to the story of the paralytic. How many different kinds of paralysis are there? It does not matter; I have no trouble identifying. What a crazy, beautiful, outlandish, humorous, tear-jerking story. This paralyzed man has four friends, and what friends they are! Where do they come from? What has this man done to make such friends? We are never told. But they are beautiful indeed. They do not like it that their friend is paralyzed. They will go to any lengths, go through any antics, suffer any embarrassment, risk any danger or rejection – go right through the roof if they have to. Was the paralytic begging them to put him down and leave things alone? Probably. But his friends are "merry." In the old language, that means they are *indiscourageable – undaunted*.

What are friends for? We think friends should be *for* us, but friendship is bigger than that. Courageous and caring as these friends are, they still cannot heal the paralytic. The wound we all carry is deeper than that.

But these friends also have faith. That is one of the startling twists of the story. The paralytic does not have to have faith; his friends have faith *for* him. The four friends carry this man to Jesus. It is the New Testament principle of intervention. Sometimes we are not supposed to mind our own business. Sometimes letting people do their own thing is deeply cruel. It does not make any difference to this paralytic that Jesus embodies love, has authority over demons, can call upon the power of God to reconcile and to heal. It's all just words.

WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOUR?

As far as he knows, it will make no difference whether he ever sees or meets Jesus. But the four friends see it differently – the *believe* it differently. So the four friends carry him. That is what friends are for. They drop whatever else they are doing – neglect whatever else they care about and have going. They carry him through the heat of the day, past the crowds, and up to and through the roof. In short, they do whatever they have to in order to get him to Jesus. *And that changes everything.*

Have you got four friends like that? Are you one of the four for anybody else? I would like to be a good friend to some people. I guess all of us would. I used to think this meant I should be strong and able to help or save my friends. But it does not. I am not strong enough, wise enough, good enough, or faithful enough to help my friends. Oh, sometimes I can listen or loan money or get lucky with an important contact. I can encourage my friends and believe in them. It is not that such things do not count, but they are not enough. Eventually, inevitably – just like with me – my friends need more than I can give them. In the long run, the only hope is to get them to Jesus. If I can get them to Jesus, I know they will be all right. Even *that* I cannot do very well all by myself. We need each other. It is hard to carry anybody very far all by yourself. It often takes four or more to get it done. Do you have three other friends who know what friends are for? If not, the Holy Spirit is trying to introduce you to each other. It would be nice if you would be watchful and try to cooperate.

Sometimes we try to get along without God. That is our biggest mistake. A second is like unto it: we try to get along without friends. That is our second biggest mistake. If you are converted – if you are trying to walk the Christian WAY – the Holy Spirit will send you friends. You do not have to make them; you do not even have to know how. You just have to stop turning them away. But it is a promise as certain as the sunrise: if you are converted, the Holy Spirit will send you friends – and send you *as* a friend. So it is important to know what friends are for.