

First Steps

Sermon 7 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 24, 2019

Luke 5: 17 – 26

There are so many threshold moments in the first years of parenting: first day home from the hospital, first smile, first tooth, first bite of rice cereal, first word. With each first, parents and grandparents alike gather behind smart phones and video cameras, trying to capture the memories. No matter how many warning signs that a new development is about to occur, our children seem to catch us off guard and surprise us with their new skills. I was in the sanctuary of College Park Baptist Church when Mia started crawling. After 10 months of watching and waiting, she just had to start crawling *during* a wedding rehearsal I was participating in. It wasn't long after that she took her first steps, and I was there for those! Justin was outside pressure washing the deck, so I scooped up our child, rushed downstairs and called Justin inside to see what had taken place. The second steps were just as magical as the first, and even though we were filled with excitement, we had no idea what Mia's newfound mobility would mean for our lives.

This was a whole new world.

Those first steps meant that our daughter could now go places on her own. With her hands liberated from the work of crawling, when she travelled on her own from one room to the next, she could grab things! Her newfound freedom was exhilarating for her and terrifying for us. Of course, we celebrated this monumental development but a small part of us longed for the old days, when we could plop her down in a swing or playmat and trust her to stay put, right where we left her. We missed those days. They were familiar, and predictable. We could protect our daughter by keeping her right where we wanted her. But the better part of us knew that she would never become who God created her to be, so long as she remained within our playmat square of safety and certainty.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we find a similar story of first steps. A paralyzed man is lowered into a room full of people and laid at Jesus feet. Jesus heals him and he stands up, takes his mat, and walks out - taking his first steps into a whole new world.

Jesus is inside a home either teaching or healing or both. Pharisees and other learned folks were huddled around to engage and observe whatever might unfold. [This is the first time we meet the Pharisees in Luke's Gospel. And while we know (because we've read ahead) that they will eventually be at odds with Jesus over the interpretation of Torah Scripture, this gathering is not that kind of event.] New Testament Scholar, Amy Jill Levine says that this event "seems more like a mass endorsement than a concerted assessment."¹ They wanted to meet this Jesus everyone was talking about!

¹ Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington. *The Gospel of Luke*. 143

With folks gathered from every village of Galilee and from Judea and from Jerusalem², the space was so full that the entrances were blocked and no one could get in. This is a big problem for the men who arrive carrying their friend, who is paralyzed and laying on a bed. This man needs to be healed, and Luke already told us that Jesus is full of healing power that day. But the man can't get in because the doors are blocked.

His friends were stubborn and would not let that be the end of it. So, they went with plan B and lowered their friend down through the roof.

This is one of those stories that most of us have heard time and time again. Most of us could probably recite the narrative from memory. It is also a problematic story for many of us because we see a man in need of physical healing and the first thing Jesus does is to tell him that his sins are forgiven.

Now, as good readers of the Bible, we know that we should not give into a superficial reading of this story which might tempt us down paths that assume that this man's paralysis was the result of some sin in his past. A quick read through the book of Job will correct that theological conclusion. So why does Jesus respond the way that he does when he sees this man?

Everyone around him (Jesus) that day expected a quick and easy physical healing. Word was out about Jesus' power to heal physical illness. He'd been healing sick people throughout the region for days. Surely the crowds had gathered expecting the same thing to happen on this day.

We can also assume that the friends who carried the man up to the roof believed that Jesus would heal his physical body. Why else would they go to such extreme measures?

But when Jesus looked upon the man lying on the bed that day, he saw so much more than anyone in the room or on the roof could see.

This week an article was published called, "Grief Hides in the Church Bathroom."³ In it the author describes a recent experience at church. She'd noticed a friend leave in the middle of worship, crying. She ducked out the back and followed this friend to the bathroom where she was found weeping and crumpled over on the floor. The friend had recently lost her 8-month old child and could no longer hold in the pain while others celebrated around her. Other church-goers came and went, seeing the two women, but unsure of what to say to them.

² Luke 5:17

³ <https://religionnews.com/2019/02/20/grief-hides-in-the-church-bathroom/> retrieved 2.20.2019

Reading this article made me wonder about the crowds who had gathered in the house with Jesus. On their way in, had they passed by the paralytic? Had they looked upon him and thought, "I wish there was something I could do?" And had they continued on their way, because they just weren't sure how to help.

It makes me wonder if we are the kind of people who can grieve with our friends when everyone else wants to celebrate?

...if we are the kind of people who would notice someone crying in the bathroom... and could sit with them on the floor offering whatever it was we had to offer, even if it was nothing more than presence in the midst of pain. Are we the kind of people who would say, I don't know how to fix your problem, how to heal your suffering, but I know someone who can and I will sit here until you're ready, I will walk with you all the way and I will carry you when you need me to...

There are so many different kinds of healing and all of them are needed. There is physical healing, yes, but there is also emotional healing and social healing and spiritual healing.

For the man in today's reading to be paralyzed meant that he was unable to participate in the fishing economy, unable to play an acceptable role in the social fabric, and incapable of the independence required for dignity and self-respect in his world. There was so much more than physical healing needed on that day... and Jesus could see it.

The truth is that just like the man on the bed mat and the grieving mother, we are all in need of all kinds of healing. We are not physical bodies that operate separately from our spiritual selves, our social selves, our political selves, and our emotional selves. No, we are all whole beings operating in whole communities with other whole and complex people. It may be easier to imagine that we can separate brokenness in one part of our lives from all the others, but eventually we will have to come to terms with the reality that it is all connected.

All of the people who had gathered in the room with Jesus that day were probably in need of healing. They may not have shown it in such a visible way as the paralytic, in fact, if they were like us, they may have been trying to cover up and pretend like everything was alright. But we need to understand that in that room full of people, a room so full that the doors were blocked, someone was hurting, someone was suffering, someone was broken, someone was in need of God's healing.

And as we imagine this room full of people gathering around Jesus it's hard not to think about this sanctuary. About each of us in this room, the burdens that weigh on us, the struggles in our lives – some of them physical, some of them emotional, some of them social, some of them economic, some of them spiritual – and all of them bound up together and held within our very bodies. Here we are, huddled up together, just like those crowds who'd gathered around Jesus in the house that day. Many of us unaware of

the pain held by the one sitting next to us. Many of us unsure of how to bring healing when the pain seems so layered.

And we truly may not know how to bring healing in the same way that Jesus could because we cannot see as fully as Jesus can! But what might happen if we could learn from the friends who took those first steps? The first step toward the roof carrying the weight of the paralyzed man, or the first step toward the bathroom with the conviction that no one should have to cry alone on that floor. The friends in each of these stories, both ancient and modern, show us that when we take that first step toward our sisters and brothers who are in need of healing we are bringing them closer to the one who can heal all that is broken – even that which we cannot see.

As people of faith we are called to take those steps. In fact, these steps are the very definition of faith itself, at least according to Luke. “When he saw their faith” the Gospel says, faith that grew legs and took those first steps, steps toward a friend on a mat, steps up onto the roof, and faith that compelled them to do it all without ever wondering if healing was even possible. That is what faith looks like in Luke’s Gospel. It looks like action, like movement toward one another, it looks like friends willing to take a step toward that which is sick, that which is broken, that which is outcast, that which is vulnerable and carry it back to the middle of the room where Jesus is waiting with all of his healing power.

And when we get there, carrying our own burdens and the burdens of our neighbors the words Jesus spoke to the paralytic that day are just the same as the words that Jesus offers to each of us. “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.... take up your mat and walk .” Because with the Pharisees we are learning that there is no difference between the healing Jesus offers our physical selves and that which he offers our spiritual selves... we are all mixed up parts of one body. Physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, economic, political, social, and more... all woven together in these bodies that God has made and called God’s own beloved.

The question is, do we believe that God can heal us – all of us – every part?

And if we believe it, will we begin to take those first steps toward one another when the pain starts to show? Or will we be more like the Pharisees, pretending like we have it all together, who fail to understand that God is here to heal us all... but we have to take those first steps.

Maybe those steps are toward a friend who we know is suffering, or maybe those steps are acknowledging our own suffering. It doesn’t matter whether we are on the mat ourselves or if we are strong enough to carry it for someone else, we need one another on this journey toward healing and it all starts with the first step.

Like a baby learning to walk for the first time, the risk is great but the reward is greater.

The question is, are we brave enough to take those first steps?