



Tell me the stories of Jesus

Small group questions

The Power of Us – Mark 2

Leaders – if the questions make no sense or you don't know the answer – please contact the preacher!

1. Re-read Mark 2:1-12. What (or who) most resonates with you right now from this story of Jesus?
2. Can you think of a time when either you were a part of, or the recipient of, a group of friends who wanted to make something better? Or who worked toward reflecting Jesus together? What was the collaborative process like?
3. What do you think motivates this group of friends in Mark's gospel to do so much for their friend, even lowering him through the roof to get him to Jesus? What are the implications for us as a church community?
4. In this passage, Christ surprises everyone when he forgives the paralyzed man – when everyone is expecting Jesus to heal him. Why is this so crucial to the story? What does it reflect about man's deeper need as well as Christ's character?
5. How can Christ's forgiveness for us personally lead us to be more creative in loving others or in bringing them to Jesus? What crazy ideas could we explore to extend God's love to others more creatively in our community?
6. What are some of your favourite stories of Jesus?

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This past Christmas, my husband gave me tickets to some of the shows at the Queensland Performing Arts Center in Brisbane. We went to a lot of theatre when we lived in the U.S., so this was a treat. And the more shows we’ve seen lately, the more I remember why I love the theatre so much. It’s one of those rare art forms that depends entirely on the collaborative process, starting first with an idea, then a playwright who writes a million drafts of a story, then a director casts actors who learn lines and blocking, producers get the word out, stage managers and set designers and lighting crews all work hard to make sure the story told on a stage is as close to right and believable and entertaining as possible.

But it doesn’t end when the curtain goes up. It requires an audience to come and observe and interact with the play. Every single person involved in a performance of live theatre is crucial to its success, and it can be a powerful, sometimes life-changing experience. It really is a community effort.

Of course, you could say the same about, say, a good sports team that needs the talents and focus of each player to pull off a win. Or a business that requires each employee’s gifts so the entire company can succeed. Or an orchestra that needs each instrument. You get the idea. Every parent I know absolutely confirms that, “It really does take a village to raise a child.” In other words, something profound happens when people come together around a single cause to accomplish something no one could do on his own. I think we most reflect God the Trinity in those moments.

That’s one of the reasons I’ve always loved this story of a group of guys who bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus. It’s inspiring and instructive on so many levels, which we’ll get to in a second. It also happens to be the first in our new sermon series, *Tell me the stories of Jesus*. In the coming weeks we’ll hear from a variety of folks who’ve chosen a particular Gospel story to explore for us. The goal of the series is to know and love Jesus more deeply *so that* we might live more fully in his love as we love our community. What an amazing gift that we have these gospel stories, revealing to us the historic record of Christ’s ministry and life on earth. That we have these stories at all is because many many people listened and observed, wrote and translated, printed and risked their lives to bring copies of the Bible all over the world. See? Amazing things happen when a group of people share a sacred goal. Everyone benefits.

So let's look at this story in Mark 2, which on the surface looks like a simple story about a group of friends, but reads like a well crafted play with layers of meaning: If you'll indulge me, I think we could imagine the story in 4 acts:

PP Act I we see the Set Up of the story in verses 1-5.

PP Act II is the Fall Out or the raising of the stakes, in verses 6-7.

PP Act III is the Plot Twist in verses 8-9.

PP And Act IV the Wrap Up (or take away) in verses 11-12. **PP**

So keep your Bibles (or scripts) open as we look at this dramatic—and sometimes comic—story and what it means for us as a community of friends.

PP Act I. The Set Up. The first 5 lines give us everything we need to know about the story, especially the conflict that frames the whole “play”:

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. 2 So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. 3 Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. 4 Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

First, the setting, Capernaum, is about 32 km from Nazareth and seems to be the newest home base for the Lord, which some scholars think might be Peter's house. Then we've got great opening scene with a cast of characters on stage here: Jesus is preaching the Word. He's attracted such a huge crowd that it's standing room only. Four friends get the idea that maybe this New Rabbi can help their paralyzed friend. So they put him on a thin mat (which suggests they're probably poor) and carry him a good distance. But when they get to the house, they bump into all sorts of obstacles.

Now, they could see the crowd, become discouraged, turn back, and pat themselves on the back for giving it a go. Or they could see some local authorities in the crowd, and feel like fools for bringing their friend to this type of event. Or they could say to themselves, Listen, guys, we've come this far, we might as well figure this out together.

Then they hear Jesus preaching and something about HIM grabs them so completely that they get a crazy idea: Luke gives us a bit more detail in chapter 5 of his gospel: *When they could not find a way to (get him into the house) because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.*

Like many of the houses at that time, this one had a staircase on the side that went up to the roof. The roof was flat and made of tiles. So they went to work, tile by tile, and all their paralyzed friend could do was watch their determination. (It's fun to imagine what Peter or the owner was thinking as bits of tile started dropping on their heads!) Any way, then, as Jesus is still talking and the crowd still listening, a spotlight suddenly shines on a man who can't move as he is slowly, precariously lowered from the roof.

It's a perfect set up for a dramatic exchange. A crowded stage, a paralyzed man dangling in front of them, and a Prophet named Jesus who has everyone's attention. Here's his big chance to show what he can do as Lord of a new Kingdom. Now he can display his great restorative power and reveal his strategic plan. Especially when he sees *their* faith, that is, the single-minded faith of these friends who have gone to great lengths to get their friend to Jesus, who *together* believe Jesus can heal him. But Jesus says the complete opposite of what anyone is expecting: "*Son, your sins are forgiven.*" What?!

So the scene is set and the story is faced with its first big problem: a group of guys goes to great lengths because they want only one thing—their friend to walk. Instead, Jesus offers . . . forgiveness?! Wait. That's not why they brought him to Jesus. So what's Jesus doing? And how will the other characters react to this uncomfortable situation?

PP Act II: The Fall Out. This side of history we know that what many expected of Jesus and what he actually did were often completely different. Jesus was just supposed to heal this paralyzed man who'd been dropped through the roof of this house. Instead, he says, "Son your sins are forgiven."

And that's the can of worms, the fall out that raises the stakes for our play and its protagonist, Jesus. Verses 6-7 show us some faces we might not have noticed in the crowd on stage at first, but now we see them clearly as some teachers of the law who've come to check out Jesus. And they're not dumb. They know only God can forgive sins and this human being from Nazareth standing in front of them, giving an interesting lecture, doesn't look like their idea of God.

Jesus, they think, is blaspheming for having the chutzpah to tell the man his sins are forgiven. As one commentator said (quite dramatically, I'll add): *Since man had trod the globe, sin against God had never been pardoned by the direct, authoritative utterance of fleshly lips.*

A miracle of healing would have been easier for everyone to swallow, but as a searcher of hearts, Jesus saw the unspoken desire of the sick man, and responded. Jesus knew what was in the human heart. Just as he knew in his spirit what the leaders were thinking, and how they were judging him. Meanwhile, the guys on the roof are peering down hoping to hurry things along as their paralyzed friend waits, awkwardly, in front of everyone.

So in what's the first recorded exchange of hostility between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, Jesus confronts them publically, "Why are you thinking these things?" Now they're nervous—how'd he know what they were thinking?! He challenges their pride and unbelief for the first time, though it won't be his last, and over the course of his ministry, Jesus will continue to confront them so much so that he creates as many enemies as he does followers. Who after all likes to be called out on our hypocrisy?

And because Jewish law often linked disease with sin, folks rightly believed that only God had the authority to address sin. So Jesus identifies the greatest need every human has—forgiveness—the deeper desire that affects every part of our health. Sin—as one pastor of mine once defined as 'forgetfulness' or living apart from God—cripples us in ways far greater than our physical bodies ever could. And that's the fall out we all have to face.

PP Act III: The Plot twist

Just as the guys on the roof are about to think their friend might not walk out of there, and just as the religious leaders are considering their next move, Jesus pulls a fast one. It's a plot twist that no one sees coming.

Referencing the book of Daniel, Jesus identifies himself as the *Son of Man*, the one they've been waiting for, *the* one who alone has power both to forgive *and* to heal. He says to the young man in front of everyone, "so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I tell you get up" and with such a statement, Jesus is claiming to be God in the Flesh. And it's costly. Forgiveness always requires someone else absorbs the pain. It's as if Jesus, the God of Love, is saying here, I know about true authority and true forgiveness. How? I'll go to unimaginable lengths to free you from brokenness and sin. I'll take your sins on my body so that you can be a new person. I'll die so you can live. SO When he tells the broken, sinful man to get up, take his mat and go home, an amazing thing happens: he does—in full view of everyone! His legs move for the first time in ages and his heart is lighter than he can ever remember. A visible miracle of healing wouldn't have been enough for us to see who Jesus really was as God incarnate. And so as he always has,

God provides an ‘invisible’ way for this man to become who the Maker of Heaven and earth always wanted him to be—whole in both heart and body.

I’m thinking at this point the men on the roof are high fiving each other, the leaders beneath them are humiliated, but the crowd, well the crowd is both dumbfounded and ecstatic as they watch the man . . . move.

PP Act IV: The Wrap Up (or take away)

The final scene of our story ends with Mark telling us that when the man *stood up, bent over* to get his mat and put one foot in front of the other, all eyes watching, everyone was amazed and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

I’d like to paraphrase that this way: the guys on the roof ran down the stairs, joined their healed, forgiven friend and the crowd in the street and formed a massive conga line from one end of Capernaum to the other! It was a wild joy-filled festival of praise, something everyone wanted to be a part of (and a great way to send out an audience in the theatre). Why not? See, the best way to make a crowd amazed is to be a crowd amazed God has indeed visited us!

Yes, God himself in Human form, in the Person of Jesus Christ who lived on the earth as a man 2,000 years ago, encountered them. He had seen *their* faith and responded. In fact, they had never looked more *God-like* than when they worked together, God who is Community in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When they acted as one with the single focus of healing their broken friend, they most reflected the Triune God we celebrate this morning.

Yes, a few determined friends brought someone they cared about to Jesus in a most creative and unconventional way. These guys did what they could, not necessarily by teaching a bible class or heading up a new ministry, but by cutting a whole in a roof. And that’s the power of Christian community; each member does its part like the passage in 1Cor. And that’s the beauty that attracts those who are searching, who say, I want to be a part of that!

Like us, they’re looking for a story Greater than their own, for a love they’ve always longed for but never imagined was possible. For a freedom that comes when the burden of bitterness and un-forgiveness is replaced with God’s Eternal Grace. And it is this winsome response that rises in us who know what it means to be forgiven when we don’t deserve it. It’s compassion personified and each of us has a crucial role to play as the Body of Christ, to make our church a place that welcomes the entire Sunshine Coast.

But there's one final takeaway that needs to be clear: These friends are *not* the heroes of this story, any more than our own community is extraordinary in and of itself. Those guys were as limited as their crippled friend. They fell short. They hadn't got it right. It's only when they set their focus on Jesus, when they fixed their eyes on him that their world changed and their friend was restored. So too, if you've experienced the forgiveness of the One who took our place on the cross, if you have been set free and made new and walked in ways you never thought possible because of hearing Jesus say to you personally, Son, Daughter, your sins are forgiven, you can't help but want to bring others to him, whatever that looks like.

So what do we need to do to bring friends and loved ones to Jesus? How do we, say, get more families to join us on Sundays? By being a family they want to belong to, by offering and being something so much better than nippers or Sunday brunch or hikes in the park. Not that there's anything wrong with these things, but there's so much more in gathering to hear the Words of Jesus, like he offered in this historic account. There's so much more in coming together, some of us at great lengths, to worship the Only One who gives our lives meaning, the One true God who heals and forgives and fills us with joy unending. Our questions should not be what can I do to make my life better, but what can *we* do together to point others to Jesus? How can we participate in this holy collaboration called life together?

Scripture says that *we* have the mind of Christ. *We* are His body. *We* love because He first loved us. What was it about Jesus Christ of Nazareth that motivated these friends so? It was His love, his character, his majesty and authority and grace that drew them. And this Great God of the Universe, the Hero of all the bible, draws us still. Let's pray.