

Sermon Title: God's Resounding "Yes!"
Text: Isaiah 43:18-25, Mark 2:1-12

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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Our Gospel lesson for this morning is one of those stories that was etched into my brain early on. The church I grew up in had something like our Kinderchurch program, with the youngest children taking their leave at about the time of the sermon. The difference was that the person who ran that program in my home church was something of a craft-master. We worked for *months* on what I was convinced was a scale model of Noah's Ark, shaped out of cardboard, and painted to the color of gopher wood, with pairs of animals crafted out of clay filling the removable decks, or neatly lined up at the massive door. I recall—though I won't swear to this—a rainbow that was then propped over the entire colossus. The story of Noah, thereby, was transferred to our young minds, by the ingenious constant employment of our hands.

Likewise, I have a clear recollection of a project that stretched on for weeks, as we made an authentic home from the time of Jesus, with a broad stairway that led up the side and around the back. A careful square had been cut out of the roof, and a crowd marshaled around the door. The centerpiece, though, was a man lying on a stretcher, suspended by twine through the opening, as his four hopeful friends looked on. The craft master was also a fine story-teller, and he loved to tell the tale from the perspective of Jesus, who was busy doing Jesusy sorts of things when he noticed some patches of mud falling from the ceiling. Those in the crowd were to polite to notice until the light broke through, and all watched as the four friends carefully lowered their paralyzed brother into the room where Jesus was speaking.

It was, I suppose, this craft master's particular take on the story that settled into my brain, so it must have been that he was taken most of all by the faithfulness and tenacity of those four friends, who just wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and did everything in their power to assure that the paralyzed man got the attention he needed. It was a story of friendship, above all else, and the implicit message was that we, too, must do all we could to bring *our* friends to Jesus.

Don't get me wrong—that's a perfectly good moral, and it leads me to wonder, as I've been sorting and sifting the comments and questions and threads of conversations that have been bubbling around our church in relation to our annual meeting relating to how we, as a congregation, reach out more effectively to newcomers. Why is it, I wonder, that the majority of folk who are received into adult membership in this church—not including our confirmation classes—find this congregation by looking in the yellow pages? If I were to ask how many of you had invited a friend to a worship service in the last year, how many hands do you think would be raised in our midst? Now think of how many hands would be raised if I asked how many of you have suggested a new restaurant, or a movie, or a book, to that same set of friends? That old craft master had a point. It *is* about friendship, and I suppose we could do much worse than to invite those friends to "meet Jesus" here.

But as I've lived with this story since, I have to admit it might not be the point that Mark was trying to make when he put the story so prominently in his telling of Jesus' life. To be sure, it is that faith of the friends, in the telling of the story, that moves Jesus to act, but honestly, after a scene like this, with a guy swinging in from ropes dangled through a hole in the ceiling you don't

think Jesus could possibly have said, “Sorry, but not today. You’re just going to have to wait in line!” And, if you think about it, even the man who is healed plays a minor role in the drama. We know him only by his affliction. Jesus doesn’t ask his name, or even what particular sins might be involved if he *were* to act on his behalf. Just because he’s paralyzed doesn’t mean there might not be some things he’s done in his life that Jesus might want to think twice about, but there’s nary a hesitation. Jesus sees, and he says, without so much as a comma, “your sins are forgiven.” It leads me to think that this must be a story about more than one lucky guy and his four good friends.

And the proof, I think, lies in the fact that the majority of the verses we read this morning from Mark’s Gospel deal, not with the man who was healed or with his friends, but with those who were upset by what they’d seen. The main characters in the Gospel story were not the ones who went dancing away, but those who were first appalled and then amazed.

It’s all the more perplexing when you realize that Mark is pretty careful to point out that these particular scribes weren’t even really looking for a fight. They were sitting there, the Gospel says, “questioning in their hearts.” You’ve got to remember that Jesus hadn’t even *done* anything yet, which to my mind makes their questioning pretty legitimate. I’d be in pretty rough shape if I were held accountable for every time I “questioned in my heart.”

“*Your sins are forgiven*,” Jesus says. Well, isn’t that easier said than done? Don’t we agree that forgiveness belongs to God alone? Wouldn’t *you* think twice if you were listening to a preacher who made such a claim? Or am I the only skeptic in the house? Maybe it’s a better question as to why Jesus didn’t just leave these poor guys alone, or maybe heal *their* thoughts. What’s to be gained by taking their private reservations, and putting them on display?

I can, in fact, understand the motivation of the scribes in their questioning. Theirs was, after all, a religious system grounded on the notion that there were certain things you had to do in order to have your sins forgiven—and they were things that were given by pretty good authority, as a part of the Law that Moses brought down from Sinai. To think that this all could be taken care of with a wave of Jesus’ hand threatens the foundations of their religious universe. For the scribes’ religion to work, it had to be a little harder than that.

And it occurs to me that there are not a few scribes in *our* churches today—folk who seem to think that controlling who is forgiven and who is not is pretty important stuff. A handful of you have read the report, which will be at the center of our denomination’s General Assembly this summer on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church. It strikes me from *my* reading of that document that we’re kind of stuck between those for whom the peace of the church is dependent on its unity, and those who insist that the peace is founded on its purity.

Who may, and who may not be ordained in the life of the church is the question that lies closest to the center of the wrangling, but I’ve said all along that once we get past that, the *real* question will bite us: what do we *really* believe about the Lordship of Christ? And if we really believe what this story says, that the forgiveness of sins is something that belongs to God, and that in Christ, God’s forgiveness is given freely, well then what are *we* supposed to be about in this

world? If we're no longer in control of the calculus of right relationship with God, then what else is there to be done?

The answer to that question, of course, is right there in the story of Jesus and the man, still lying on his cot, his sins newly forgiven, but still paralyzed. That's the easy part, Jesus says to them in their doubts, and then, to address their eternal wonder, he says to the man, "Stand up, take up your mat, and go *home*!" And in so doing, Jesus instructs us as to the *real* dynamic of forgiveness. The point is not that we will then somehow be made pure and set aside for all eternity—bound to our cots, now, not by the paralysis of our bodies, but by the mortifying possibility that we might sin again. The point is that we are forgiven and healed so that we can take it *home* with us—go back into the world, and *live* the life that God has set before us—the *new thing* that God is about in us, and through us, if only we would leave our sin and brokenness behind.

It will take the rest of the Gospel to flesh out exactly what that new thing is that Jesus had in mind, not just for that man who was lowered down from the roof, but maybe even more for the scribes who held their reservations in their hearts. The problem is that we tend to think about forgiveness as a ledger transaction in which certain bad things we've done are either erased from the books, or balanced by a fresh deposit of God's love. But as best I can tell, that's not what Jesus meant when he spoke of forgiveness. Because the language of forgiveness is the language of *relationship*—being restored, turned around, reoriented, pointed toward *home*.

"Forgiveness" is not so much an acceptance of a past wrong as it is a radical reorientation of your life, measured by its promise, instead of its short-comings. If Jesus' life is the model—and I'm afraid it must be, at least this morning, because the man who is healed in this story is gone forever, as are the scribes who wondered and were amazed—it is a life that is, in the end, measured not by what is done for it, but by what it has managed to do for others: a life that claims its eternal inheritance, to be sure, but only as it is first poured out on a cross.

At the end of the day, my craft-master was right, I suppose. Each one of us is in this story somewhere. His only, most forgivable error might be that he was just a touch near-sighted. We may well be those friends, who brought their brother to Jesus. But maybe we're the one lying on the cot, paralyzed and needing God's Word of forgiveness, and hope. Or maybe we're the scribes, with so many questions in our hearts that they're beginning to elbow out all the love that should be there. Maybe we're just the crowd, before whom it's all happening while we shift our weight from foot to foot, and stand on our toes to get a better view.

Whoever we are, at the end of the day, the amazing thing in my mind is that the Word of God to *all* of us is remarkably the same. Maybe you'll hear it from Isaiah: "Do not remember the former things, or consider things of old. I am about to do a *new* thing. There it is, right there! Don't you see it?" Or maybe you'll hear it from Jesus' gentle scolding of the questioning scribes: "why so many *questions*?!" Wherever you hear it, the address is the same. The One who blots out our transgressions, for *God's own sake*, and who does not *remember* our sins, says to us all, "your sins are forgiven...stand up, take up your mat, and go home." Seek your peace where God has put it—not in ritual definitions of purity, not in hastily constructed unities, but in right relationship—with God, and with each other.

The result, I'm willing to bet, will be the same as that of all those who were left standing in that house, with a hole in the roof where the man of the stretcher had been let down. "They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'we have never seen anything like this!'"

Let us pray.