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Questions Jesus Asked: Which Is Easier?

(Luke 5:17-26)

(Luke 5:17-26) "One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. 18 Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; 19 but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. 20 When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." 21 Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 22 When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, **"Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?"** 24 *But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--he said to the one who was paralyzed--" I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home."* 25 *Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.* 26 *Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."*

"We have seen strange things today." Well, I should say so. Or as our childrens' favorite expression when they were teenagers had it: *"Duh!!"* To get the full impact of that strangeness, though, we may have to re-imagine this story in a modern context to see just how startling it is. So try this: Imagine, if you will, this scene updated into our times. Imagine that you are hosting a get-together at your home for a famous teacher. You've issued a ya'll come invitation to anyone who can be there. But many, many, many more show up than you ever expected. . You've moved the gathering out on your covered patio to accommodate the crowds, and there sits the famous teacher, people pressed in around, the crowds spilling over into the backyard. And then from down the

street come a few guys come carrying another guy on a stretcher, but of course they can't get anywhere near the teacher. So they disappear around the side of the house.

And then suddenly you hear a rumbling noise and just as suddenly a chain saw pokes its way through that nice covered patio roof that you spent so much money on. The friends of the man on the stretcher cut a hole in the roof, and then carefully lower him down – plop! – right in front of the teacher. And, after a few quiet words exchanged between the man and the teacher that you can't quite hear, the man gets up from his stretcher and they make their way back out – *“Excuse me; coming through.”* And you are left there looking at an abandoned stretcher, hunks of shingle and spewings of sawdust everywhere, and a big hole in that covered patio's roof. Now do you see the humor in Luke's line? *“We have seen strange things today.”* Duh!!

But of course the story is “strange” in a deeper and more important sense. Something full of awe, something holy, even – and therefore ***disturbing*** – happened in that exchange between Jesus and the man. *Something* – strange, wonderful, remarkable! – that had allowed a man who had been *carried* in to *walk* out. And so did you catch the crowd's ambivalent mood here as Luke tells the story? Not only did they glorify God for what they had seen, they were also disturbed by it – because every one of us know that when the power of the holy surprises us life may never be the same again. And yet that power of holiness – so remarkable, so disturbing – was conveyed in a very simple question. *“Which is easier,”* Jesus asked, *“to say ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say ‘Rise up and walk’?”* It's a disturbing question because the answer **isn't at all obvious**. ***Is*** it easier to **accept** healing or accept forgiveness? Is it easier to **hear** the

words of forgiveness, the words of grace, or to actually rise up and walk and act **as if it were true** that we are truly graced and truly forgiven?

Now the hearing, all by itself, of course, is not really the hard part, is it? Those grace-filled words can wash over us like a warm spring shower but not really change anything. It's the **accepting** of the truth of those words and letting them get inside you and disturb you that is the tough thing; that's much, much harder sometimes, isn't it? Because to truly accept the gift of grace, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of healing will mean that we are confronted with the prospect of changes to our lives. For God's grace, God's healing, God's forgiveness always **also** comes with an **opportunity**: the opportunity to change.

That's why the emphasis in this story from Luke is not just on Jesus' miracle, but also on that paralyzed man's **response**. Look at what he did: having **heard** the words of grace, he really did **get up** and walk out! But that meant he had to do some changing, didn't it? It would have been easier -- wouldn't it? -- to have enjoyed the sheer presence of Jesus' company, to feel comforted by the sound of his voice, to have enjoyed a moment in the spiritual spa -- and then to have his friends carry him back out. Not healed, but not having had to be disturbed, either. In the gospel of John, there is a story of Jesus healing a blind and paralyzed man. On that occasion, Jesus also asked a question of that man: *"Do you want to be healed?"* A strange question? Well, actually, no -- for a "yes" to Jesus' question -- from either man -- will mean that they have to take some responsibility and live differently. They will have to change

So, the question that this story confronts us with this Lenten morning is this:
What keeps us from accepting that opportunity to be healed? What makes us sometimes more inclined to take the easier path of simply hearing the words but doing nothing about them?

It's always nice when preachers know something about what they're talking about. And while I do believe that everything that I have said is true, and that God's grace does indeed always come with the opportunity to make real changes in our lives, you need to know that *I* know that that is not always easy. Far easier sometimes just to hear the words but not do anything about them. Far easier said than done maybe most of the time. For I know, believe me, I know, that sometimes you or I just don't have the resources to make the kinds of changes that God is offering to us. Sometimes we are just too fragile. Sometimes we just don't have the energy for one more confrontation. I have a friend who, after a hellacious year full of hurt and stress and change, said to me once *"I know there are some things I need to change about my life, but I'm just really tired of 'growth experiences.'"* That's true of **all** of us on occasion. And when it is, to be told that you will only experience the full measure of God's grace and healing if you then make some probably hard changes in your life can feel not like good news, but bad news. It can feel like one more thing that you are failing at. It can feel not like liberation but like yet another burden, yet another thing on an unmanageable to do list.

But look at our story again. Jesus knows what our lives are like. Jesus knows that there are times when we just can't – **we just can't** – truly believe and truly change. Not right now anyway. How does he know? Well, the most remarkable line in this

remarkable, strange, wonderful story is this: “*When [Jesus] saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”* Whose faith? The friends’. **Their** faith. When Jesus saw their faith he was moved to offer healing to the one on the stretcher. Why is this remarkable? Well, I think that it is indeed the acknowledgment by Jesus that sometimes you or I don’t have – in that moment anyway – the strength to fully hear, to fully receive, to fully believe, to fully change. Preacher Fred Craddock once said that there are times in **everyone’s** lives – even in the best Christians’ lives – when believing comes hard and when, at least for awhile, you have to let your friends believe **for** you. You have to indeed let your friends carry you. Maybe not forever. But because the gospel is truly, truly good news and not bad and burdensome news, Jesus knows that sometimes we only are able to get by, indeed, “with a little help from our friends.”

I have known my friend Bob for over forty years now. It is a friendship that goes back to when we were both teenagers in our Region’s summer camp program. And for the last 32 of those 40+ years, as you heard me talk about a few weeks ago, each year Bob and I have gotten together for what we have come to call “Boys Camp,” three or four days spent together catching up and renewing our friendship, three or four days learning from one another, sharing what we’re reading, what we’re thinking, mutually encouraging one another’s ministries. But over those three decades, whether we were roughing it in the woods or whether it was a road trip with nights at the Hampton Inn, looking back over those thirty-two years I realize our friendship illustrates exactly what Jesus was commending when he saw the faith of that hurting man’s friends. In thirty-two years of knowing one another we have sometimes gone through hard times. Grief.

Loss. Problems with children. Difficult decisions. Uncertainty about work and vocation. Economic troubles. Times when it was hard to believe. And those were precisely the times when we were able to carry one another, precisely the times when, at least for a while, one of us could uplift the other one who was hurting, doing for him, even, sometimes, believing for him until he was able to do so again for himself.

“We have seen strange things today.” Indeed! And so as we stare up at the hole there in the roof left after this strange and remarkable story is done, what do we know? We know that God through the person of Jesus Christ is always offering grace and healing and forgiveness. We know that the deep-down acceptance of that grace and healing and forgiveness will mean that we will have to make some changes in the ways we do things and who we are. But we also know that **God** knows that sometimes we just can’t make those changes in that particular moment. God knows that sometimes we find it hard to hear, hard to accept, hard to believe. And so it is our friends, our community, who can believe for us for awhile, who can carry us for awhile, who love us so much that they’ll not only carry us but cut holes in the roofs of whatever is in our way in order to help us.

Do you have some friends like that? I hope so. Go find them today, this week, and thank them. Are there some of your friends who need **you** to be that kind of friend today, this week? Find them and let them know that you care and that you love them. For it is in the name of the One who Himself calls us **his** friends that we are empowered and enabled to do and be these things, the name of the One whose grace is to us **and** to our friends, the name of the One whose grace is always, always sufficient.

For that grace, for the opportunities it brings, for the friends who embody it –
thanks be to God! Amen.