

Last month, when Richard and I divided up preaching responsibilities for our sermon series looking at our vision and priorities for our future as a congregation, I admitted that I was kind of stumped when it came to setting building relationships as a priority. I say stumped not because I think the concept is unclear or that it's a bad idea. I think any church has to weigh it's life and the way it thinks about programs, budgets with relationships in mind. It's great to have relationships as a priority, but at the same time, building relationships is hard. They come about in a myriad of ways, but you can't manufacture them.

Take a second to think about your friends. The best relationships we have look easy and they tend to come about so naturally. As I was thinking about this sermon I got an e-mail from one of my best friends. I don't think there was a moment when I realized we would be lifelong friends. We were strangers at one point and then a year and a month later he introduced me to my wife and I was a groomsman in his wedding. I can't imagine what my life would look like without that relationship.

Our desire to seek out others and be in relationship is rooted in the very nature of God. The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that the one God is an eternal relationship of three persons. St. Augustine wrote "when you see love, you see a trinity." There is always the lover, the beloved, and the love that binds them together. Because God is an eternal triune relationship, and we are created in the image of God, Augustine was prompted to ask, in what way then the human soul reflect the reality that God is trinity? When you see love, you see a trinity. God created us with the intention that we form relationships with him and with one another. As such, these relationships are at the core of our humanity. We were created to be with and for each other.

So this morning, I want to look at a story of friendship that I think offers a glimpse of the kind of relationships we are called to build. Let us turn to Luke chapter 5, verses 17-26.

One day, while Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; 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. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? 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.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

This is the Word of the Lord.

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In the first book of Dante's divine comedy, the speaker and his guide, Virgil, come across Ulysses in the eighth circle of the inferno, and Ulysses describes his voyage from Illium with these lines.

So on the deep and open sea I set
Forth, with a single ship and that small band
Of comrades that had never left me yet.¹

"That small band of comrades that had never left me yet." Dante is only talking about one aspect of friendship, but it's an important one. Presence. Perseverance. Loyalty. Just being there. Ulysses shipmates are with him come hell *and* high water. There's something in those lines that speaks to the heart of the paralytic man's friends this gospel passage.

I have to think that the paralyzed man in Luke's story was lucky enough to have some real friends. Luke doesn't tell us how many there were, but when Mark records this story he tells us there were four. We don't know anything about his paralysis - whether it was due to injury or illness or whether Jesus' forgiveness of the man's sin is connected to his condition, or how long it had been the thing that defined him. Those parts of his story are a mystery, but we know that he had friends - a small band of comrades that refused to leave him behind.

We're told that the friends came carrying their friend on the bed, hoping to bring him into the presence of Jesus. The stories about Jesus were starting to spread. The Pharisees, the religious leaders, and the teachers of the law had all come into town to hear the new teaching of this up and coming rabbi who had the authority to heal. And maybe they came to test that authority. They were after all the faculty of the theology department - the ones responsible for fanning the flame of Israel's faith. They were all jammed up inside the house and there were other people around them and others still packing in the courtyard and Jesus is somewhere in the middle of all this. But these friend's couldn't get their friend in to see Jesus, there was too much in the way. But they persevered. They had to find a way - their friend meant too much for them to simply walk away.

It was quite common in the architecture of the Ancient Near East for houses to have ladders or stairs that provide rooftop access. And so being unable to go through the crowd, they found their above began to do some unauthorized renovation - they pulled it apart to the point where you could actually get a full grown man stretched out flat to fit inside.

I wonder what this was like for the people inside the house. They're listening intently to Jesus when suddenly a scratching noise and little debris come from the direction of the ceiling. What must they have thought? I'm fairly certain that in any culture it's a violation of social norms to 1) interrupt a religious service and 2) take off the roof of someone's house. Kind of a universal thing. Their faith is audacious, but it must have carried some trepidation. No one goes crashing through someone else's roof without fear of some consequences. But faith lives under one great compulsion: to get into the presence of Jesus. Their friend needs Jesus and that's all that matters.

If their actions strike you as a bit extreme - maybe even a bit uncivilized, consider that in the early 1970's the Taizé community in France was receiving so many letters from people who indicated

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (New York: Penguin, 1950), Canto XXVI, li 100-102, p. 236

that they wanted to spend Easter with them that they were facing the possibility of having to turn people away because they were exceeding their capacity. Brother Roger, the founder of the community - the first ecumenical monastic community in the world, which now sees over 100,000 young people make pilgrimage every year, said "we will make a way for anyone who wants to come to be able to worship with us". And so, having exhausted their ideas, a few days before Easter the brothers and some of the pilgrims removed a stained glass window, took sledge hammers in hand and knocked down the majestic hewn-stone west wall of the church of reconciliation and erected a big red and white circus tent so that the overflow of young people could worship with them on Easter. Not permanently, mind you. They took down the wall for one service. A weekend. They decided long before that day that they were going to be a community that brings people into the presence of Jesus and would adapt in any way necessary. Bringing people into the presence of the risen Lord was more important to this community than the wall of a building. Relationships define the shape of their ministry and they begin with bringing people in where they can be in proximity to Christ.

The men in our gospel story had to get their friend to Jesus. It was that important. They had to somehow just get him into Christ's presence. The story turns on the phrase, "when Jesus saw *their* faith". It's not altogether clear in the Greek whether the word "their" includes the faith of the man lying on the mat, or only to his friends. Luther calls this an *alien faith*. In his commentary on this passage he writes, "they win for this sick man with their faith a faith of his own".

Either way we look at it, there is a social dimension, a relational character to this miracle. The man who is paralyzed may be included in *their faith*, but the power of faith in this story rests on the real unity of human life. Jesus does not begin with the healing of the man's body, but with the healing of his soul. Perhaps they were not aware of it, but through their faith, these friends bring their friend into faith. You as a congregation are called to the realization of this blessing every time we present infants to be baptized or young people to be confirmed. Your faith becomes their faith. It is passed down and received. None of us got here on our own - someone carried you here. The session and I had the privilege of hearing as much last week from our confirmation students.

There are all kinds of ways that we are invited to carry others to Jesus. It may be by signing up to teach Sunday school, or volunteer for VBS, it may be a reassuring conversation you have with someone who is in the hospital, or a word of hope for someone who feels that they have lost their joy - it may be bringing your resources and your body to participate in mission work. It might mean having the courage to invite someone you're acquainted with out to coffee, or to join you in worship, But in every case it means taking the time to invest in someone else.

I wrote a little reflection in the Torch not too long ago about my Monday night Bible Study group. I've come to realize over the years that these were friends who taught me how to be a follower of Jesus. They believed for me in the times that I didn't believe. They loved me when I was wrong. They didn't try to change or impose themselves on me. There was a time when I drifted away from our fellowship and they very lovingly and gently said, we are not going to let you go. For some reason, they felt that they needed me as much as I needed them - but they also knew that I needed to be brought into the presence of Jesus and there weren't too many other places in my life where I could acknowledge his presence. And so they just welcomed me and talked about what God was doing in their lives. I think that group of friends quite literally brought me into the presence of Jesus.

The author and pastor, Eugene Peterson describes what this experience of friendship was like for me. He writes, “We have dealings with hundreds of people who the moment they set eyes on us begin calculating what use we can be to them, what they can get out of us... and then someone enters our life who isn’t looking for someone to use, is leisurely enough to find out what’s really going on in us, and is secure enough not to exploit our weaknesses or attack our strengths, recognizes our inner life and understands the difficulty of living out our inner convictions, confirms what is deepest within us. A friend.”²

It’s funny. I think this is what ministry is about. Being friends, but moreover, being the kind of friend that helps carry others into the presence of Jesus. Bonhoeffer wrote that “There is no way from us to others than the path through Christ.”³ The word in the New Testament for this kind of bond that draws people together through Christ is *koinonia* - it means a shared unity in life. Taking responsibility for and finding fulfillment in the bond that we share through Jesus. Realizing that in Christ our souls are knit together like David and Jonathan’s. And realizing, nurturing, and cultivating this bond is the most precious and most distinctive gift that we have to offer the world.

It doesn’t mean that there’s no place for the gospel being proclaimed in large groups - it doesn’t mean that there’s no place for acts of service, but both of these things find their focus when there are real relationships involved - when we are invested in each other and when we know what is really going on with each other and want the very best for each other. When we are determined not use each other, but to love each other. When we speak to each other about God not because we need to have our belief system validated, but because we believe that life pursuing the kingdom of God is so compelling that we want others to experience the joy of the treasure that we have found. That’s how each of us got here. We were brought here because our parents or our friends or our spouse loved God and wanted us to know that love. We get to carry each other.

Thanks be to God.

² Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 54

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Martin Kuske and Ilse Töte (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001) p. 95