

February 4, 2018

Mark 2: 1-12

Prayer: Dear God, we pray this morning that you breathe inspiration into our reading and understanding of this great story from the book of Mark. Let us understand it afresh, anew. We pray in the name you wore when you lived it. Amen.

Mat Carriers

There is a story in the New Testament book of Mark that I'd be willing to bet many of you are familiar with.

But I'd also be willing to bet it's familiar because of children's Sunday school, not worship services.

Because our church lectionary deals with this story very oddly, and I'm not sure why.

It's a story that comes early in Jesus's ministry when crowds are pushing close to him because he's healing everyone. Some people try to carry their paralyzed friend through the crowd, but they can't reach Jesus. So they open up a hole in a house roof and lower their friend to where Jesus is teaching inside.

I remember this story vividly from years of Baptist Sunday school. We colored pictures of these men crouched on the roof, lowering their friend's mat down to where Jesus waited.

Well, I get together once a month with other clergy women. We talk about who in here is causing trouble. Things like that.

In 2013, one of the women mentioned that she had just gone back to her home church in Anderson to preach her grandmother's funeral.

To her surprise a carful of colleagues and members from her Simpsonville church showed up. When she asked what they were doing there, they replied, "We are your mat carriers."

We are your mat carriers.

We all knew exactly what they were referencing. But I suddenly realized that in eight years of preaching, that story had never rolled around in the lectionary. I had never once used it.

So I hurried home to look it up. It's in the lectionary all right, which is a three-year cycle of suggested readings that follow the church year. But it falls on a Sunday that often doesn't exist.

It's the seventh Sunday after the Epiphany. Unless we have a late, late, late Easter, there is no seventh Sunday after the Epiphany. Lent takes over instead.

And so we don't get this extraordinary story of mat carriers. And the lectionary doesn't include Luke's similar version, nor even Matthew's slightly different version.

What a loss!

So today, we're going to read this astonishing story, simply because it is so rich: This story about friends or supporters or family members or anyone else in our lives who can carry those mats when we can't do it ourselves.

Please turn to **Mark 2: 1-12** if you'd like to read along.

Now this being Mark, he's going to entwine one story with another, so be ready.

When (Jesus) returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'

⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"?'

‘¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ — he said to the paralytic — ¹¹‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’

¹²And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’

As I indicated, there are at several stories tangled up in these 12 verses. There’s a healing story. There’s a conflict-with-religious authorities story.

But my favorite is the friendship story, the story illustrated in children’s Sunday school lessons all over the world. A story about four friends so dedicated to getting their friend in front of Jesus that they cut through a roof.

This Scripture passage comes early in Mark’s gospel. Jesus was already known for his healing, and he was quite popular.

He was preaching inside a house, perhaps Peter and Andrew’s house mentioned in the previous chapter. Jesus was surrounded by so many people that apparently this paralyzed man’s friends feared he’d leave without seeing their buddy.

The Greek tells us they literally “dug through” the roof to lower the mat on which their friend lay.

Now in chapter one of Mark, there have already been four healing stories. This is the fifth. It is also the first of five stories that show Jesus in conflict with the religious authorities.

So it is something of a hinge for this early portion of Mark. Jesus heals. The religious authorities object.

And there's a good reason they object in this passage: Jesus doesn't simply pronounce the paralyzed man healed. He pronounces him *forgiven of sins*.

A similar story in the gospel of John has Jesus healing a paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethzatha. These two stories are the only ones in all four gospels in which Jesus explicitly links illness and sin. Usually he's trying to divorce the two.

It's not clear what we are to make of this. But it does pave the way for the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities.

They could hardly object to his healing. But they certainly object to his teaching.

It's so disconcerting, in fact, that it can almost obscure the most important line in the story: **“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”**

When Jesus saw their faith....

We don't know if the paralyzed man had faith or not. But his friends sure did – enough that they were willing to dig through a roof to put their friend in front of Jesus.

It was also in 2013 that we started Triune Circles. Many of you in here have participated in the years since.

The structure is simple: A person *who wants to get out of poverty* is the leader of a circle. He or she is assigned four friends who meet with her weekly for a year to come up with strategies and tackle the obstacles that are keeping her poor. The friends don't just open their checkbooks. That's not the point.

The point is to share social capital, employment networks and problem-solving to enable the circle leader to emerge from poverty. Four friends encircling someone, praying for someone, lifting someone.

What are they if not mat carriers?

Sometimes we need mat carriers. And sometimes we need to *be* mat carriers.

In the best of all worlds, our parents are our original mat carriers. As they haul around car seats and diaper bags and playpens and set up swings and bouncy chairs and who knows what else that's been invented since I had children – they quite literally carry us.

But if there is one thing I have learned during my time at Triune, it is that not everyone had good parents. Our entire staff is reading a book that Becky Grisell gave us for Christmas: *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* by Dr. Bruce Perry.

Dr. Perry was on the forefront of the trauma-informed therapy movement that has exploded in the fields of psychiatry and medicine. Today, many physicians and social

workers and other helping professionals recognize that brain development can actually stop or be compromised by childhood trauma. By abuse or neglect or deprivation.

In decades of work with these children, Dr. Perry learned that they must be allowed to re-create the attachments and human relationships they missed at critical junctures. Those attachments and human relationships are what lead to brain development.

Some of his early patients had an experienced foster mother whom he called Mama P. Mama P was a large, powerful woman who wore brightly colored muumuus and scarves. She took in children who'd been beaten and neglected, terrorized and abused. Often, she was the seventh or eighth foster placement.

When Mama P. had a 7-year-old screaming or otherwise acting out, she would hold him tight and rock him and sing to him. She'd call him her "baby."

At first some of Dr. Perry's colleagues questioned her, thought she should be treating the child in more age-appropriate ways.

But Mama P. knew instinctively, as the medical pros eventually learned, that she had to give a child what he'd missed at 6 months and 12 months and 18 months.

She had to carry his mat for awhile longer.

When we read that, we could see so many parallels in our work. So much of that lingering damage.

In fact, that's a lot of what our Beth Messick teaches the women who are leaving the sex trade. Almost by definition, they are dealing with areas of their brains that were underdeveloped because of early sexual trauma.

Many of you already know about our partnership with Christ Episcopal Church to renovate a house that will give these women two years of free shelter, food, counseling and care as they leave the sex trade and get back on their feet. The new non-profit is called Jasmine Road, and it is based on a ministry we visited in Nashville.

Rebecca Stevens is the Episcopal priest in Nashville who founded Thistle Farms. That organization is over 20 years old, and has expanded into several houses and businesses and even into partnerships to help women in other countries.

And of all things, their latest project is ... mat weaving. Mat weaving.

Becca Stevens had been hearing about the Ritsona refugee camp in Greece, which is one of the places where all those refugees fleeing Syria, Iraq and Pakistan have landed. Tens of thousands of children are missing from this and similar camps, believed to have been lured into the sex trade. And hundreds of the women of Ritsona had no means of economic support.

One day Becca was out hiking and thinking about these women. And she came up with the idea of turning the discarded life preservers they'd worn to reach Greece into textiles. She located a local canoeing outfitter there in Nashville and got his worn-out life preservers, and tried to make a prototype.

Her first attempts, she said, looked like something out of vacation Bible school.

So she assembled a team to figure it out – a funder, a weaver, an Arabic speaker and Regina Mullins, one of the early Thistle Farms residents rescued from the sex trade. That team figured out how to combine the life preserver fabric with blankets and clothing scraps to make colorful woven mats. Becca then sent the team to Greece to set up looms and teach the Ritsona refugees how to weave the mats.

Nobody's getting rich, but the women have been able to pay for a bus to take their children into Athens for dental and medical care. They are sending money back to their families. They are taking a step to reclaim their own lives, their own destinies.

Those colorful mats carry their dreams as surely as the paralyzed man's friends carried him.

And right in the middle of it all -- cajoling, coaxing, cheering them on -- is Regina Mullins, the former prostitute who is paying forward the lessons she learned when someone carried her mat for awhile.

Sometimes we need mat carriers. And sometimes we need to *be* mat carriers.

What I find most astonishing is that the cure for so much of what ails us – our loneliness, our brokenness, our marginalization, our grief – is human kindness, human connection. Trust that another human cares about us.

Cares enough to carry our mat for awhile.

Amen.