

When Disciples Get in the Way (3/3)

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Text: Luke 5:17-26 (NIV)

17 One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. 18 Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. 19 When they could not find a way to do this 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.

20 When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

21 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

22 Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? 23 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? 24 But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 25 Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. 26 Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

Many of us here today have preached on this text. All of us have heard sermons and expositions about it. It is an inspiring passage, telling us about a group of people who would not let obstacles stand in their way. It is an evangelistic text, telling us of the power of Jesus to save and to heal. It is a text we like, because Jesus comes out on top, and at the end even those who would rather criticize him are overcome with awe.

But this is also a problematic text. It tells us that the power to heal was in Jesus; and yet that power could not be made effective for some who were outside the house. Jesus had the power to heal, but in a way that power was held hostage by the crowd around him. And *that* is the problem.

In verse 17, Luke tells us exactly who were those who stood in the way between Jesus and the sick man and his friends. Jesus is teaching in a house, and around him there are seated Pharisees and teachers of the law, who have “come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem.” Given the size of houses at that time, such a crowd of Pharisees and teachers of the law would suffice to create an unsurmountable obstacle for any who would approach Jesus —much less any who would approach him carrying a man in a bed.

The text does not say that these teachers and Pharisees were bad people, or that they were hypocrites trying to catch Jesus in some slip from orthodoxy. Other passages speak of some such teachers and Pharisees. But not here. In fact, in spite of all their bad press the doctors of the law were probably those from among the entire population who took Scripture most seriously and who studied it most assiduously. (Should we say *sola Scriptura*?) They studied Scripture carefully, to make certain that not a jot nor a title would be changed —to make certain that the people had the Word of God in all its purity. And the Pharisees were among the most committed religious people of their time. They were the ones most concerned in discovering and obeying the will of God in every possible circumstance. The Pharisees and the teachers of

the law were the religious leaders of their time, the theologians, the professionals of religion. It was to them that many looked when seeking religious guidance. They were a significant part of the religious and theological establishment of their day. They were the universities, and seminaries, and the preachers in high-steepled churches.

The problem is that, while these people sit around Jesus to listen to his teachings, and perhaps also to judge them, outside the house there are others in need —people who cannot reach Jesus precisely because the scholars and the Pharisees are sitting around him, listening to him.

Those who are outside are also fascinating. Among them we see a lame man and his friends who have an amazing imagination and daring. The normal paths are closed. In order to reach Jesus it would be necessary to open a way through the crowd. And that crowd includes very important people —Pharisees and teachers of the law who are not used to standing aside to make way for the lame and the needy; people who are used to being at the center of things, or at least near the center.

As Luke tells the story, the lame man and his friends “went up to the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles *into the middle* of the crowd in front of Jesus.” Into the middle. Closer to the center than the teachers and the Pharisees. Within that apparently closed circle. In the middle, by Jesus.

At the beginning of the story, Luke had told us that “the power of the Lord” was with Jesus.

Now, through imagination and daring action, the obstacle that would not allow that power to be effective has been overcome.

Luke does not tell us exactly when this happened. He says simply: “One day...” Yet, what happened that day still happens today. Still today, like then, Jesus has power to heal and to save, to forgive sins and to free the lame from their beds.

But still today, like then, there are circles and more circles around the Master. Today, like then, there are lame people who cannot reach Jesus, because access is blocked by the numerous and tight circles of Pharisees and teachers of the faith, of religious leaders and wise and profound theologians, of ecclesiastical, academic, and social structures. We who sit in such circles are not particularly bad people, just as those Pharisees and doctors of the law were not bad people. We simply wish to come as close as possible to the truth of Jesus, just as those teachers and Pharisees were seeking to hear him as closely as possible.

Those who sit in the closely knit circle are people who really wish to hear him. Like those ancient teachers of the law, we have spent years studying Scripture, or theology, or history. We are eager to know, to discover and to share truth. We are even eager to have others come and join in the circle and sit with us, as long as they play by our rules, and don't upset our process of listening, of studying, of reflecting, of teaching, of being the church.

Too often, however, sitting at the circle as if it were merely a matter of hearing something interesting, we do not realize that we may be blocking the way for the many lame ones who have urgent needs —or at least not making it any easier for them; for those who cannot afford the luxury nor the leisure of academic discourse; for those to whom our traditional academic discourse is unintelligible.

But there is more. It is not only the bed-ridden man who is incapacitated. Bound too are these Pharisees and scholars of the law, so used to their wisdom, to their authority, to their self-sufficiency, that they may sit there all day listening to Jesus and will not witness his power to save and to heal.

But there is good news. The text that began with people divided into two very distinct groups, those inside and those outside the house, ends with a common experience of solidarity: “Amazement seized *all of them*, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, ‘we have seen great wonders today’.”

It all begins with an act of solidarity, when those who were carrying the bed-ridden man, even though they could possibly have elbowed their way in by simply leaving him behind, are led by solidarity to imagine and to make new means of access.

And it all leads to solidarity, when the liberation of the bed-ridden man makes it possible for those in the inner circle to say that they have seen wonders.

In various ways and in different measures, all of us who are here tonight are both part of the inner circle and also bed-ridden people in need of liberation.

Today, as then, the power of Jesus is ready to heal and to save, to free us from the beds of suffering where we are tied, and to free us from our chairs of comfort, where we are blinded to the great wonders that God can do.

No matter whether we are at the center or at the margin, no matter whether we sit comfortably with the doctors of the law or we lie painfully on a bed of powerlessness, there is only one way. It is a way that combines creative imagination with solid solidarity. That is the way which we are seeking these days. And, with God's grace, as we tread that road of solidarity, we shall all be able to say, jointly and with one voice: "*Today* we have seen wonders."