

Mark 2:1-12 (NRSV)

When he [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!'

How far would you go for a friend? What risks would you take?

How far would I go for my friends? Would I go as far as Jesus went? He set the bar high: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Let's make the question easier. How far would I go to introduce a friend to Jesus? Today's story is about some friends who were willing to go to extreme lengths to get their friend to Jesus. If you were offered the deal presented to the friends of this paralyzed man, would you take it . . . or would you say "no deal" and head home?

Coming to Jesus

Capernaum is on the Sea of Galilee's northern shore. It was the hometown of Peter and became Jesus' "headquarters" during his public ministry. You can visit Capernaum today. The Franciscans have built a modern church over the ruins of Peter's house. Nearby are the ruins of a synagogue that was built several centuries after the time of Christ, the result of a capital campaign I'm sure. The new synagogue was built on the foundation of the synagogue in which Jesus preached. The original foundation is still visible.

Once, during one of Jesus' many stays in Capernaum, a crowd had gathered around him, as must have nearly always been the case. Jesus' home was packed to overflowing with so many people that you couldn't have even gotten through the front door. This seemed to pose an insurmountable problem for anyone who wanted to get to Jesus but hadn't been able to enter the house. Insurmountable, that is, unless you have the right kind of friends. Committed friends. Going-above-and-beyond friends.

One paralyzed man from the area had such friends. When they saw the overcrowding, surely the friends were tempted to simply turn away and try again another time. After all, what could they do? They wanted to help their stricken friend, but they couldn't walk through walls. Or could they?!

I wonder who first had the idea to lower the paralyzed man through a hole cut in the ceiling. Good grief; it must have sounded crazy. "Cut a hole in the roof? Are you mad? Jesus is down there. It's his house!" Yet somehow, the idea took hold among this circle of friends. And they did. Climbed up on the roof, hauling the crippled man with them. They dug through the dirt piled on the house's roof and made an opening through which they lowered their friend right in front of Jesus.

Who does such a thing? Would I do such a thing? Talk about thinking outside of the box and then actually doing it. They saw an opportunity for their friend to be rescued; one that might never come his way again. And they loved him. And they risked. And he was saved.

Healing

It's a safe bet that the friends were focused only on the man's paralysis. That's what needed fixing, after all. But the man got more than freedom from his paralysis, he got freedom

Eyewitnesses and the Gospel of Mark

What are the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection? Are they oral traditions about Jesus that had been passed around for decades before being written down? To put it another way, was there a lengthy period of anonymous transmission of these stories between the events and the writing of the gospels? Certainly, most New Testament scholarship of the last century has been grounded on just such assumptions.

In a compelling, carefully researched, and well-received new book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Professor Richard Bauckham of St. Andrews University proposes that this assumption of the anonymous passing of oral stories about Jesus is simply incorrect. Rather, the gospels are the testimony, the eyewitness testimony, of the disciples who lived and walked with Jesus. Mark's gospel is a case in point.

Papias was the bishop of Hierapolis, a city not far from Laodicea and Colossae, in the early second-century. Though Papias was what we might call a third-generation Christian, we must remember that generations overlap. For example, though the D-Day landings were more than 60 years ago, my son, Robby, 17 and born in 1990, could sit down with many veterans and hear their stories, their eyewitness testimony, about the invasion of Europe. Sixty years from now, Robby could still tell the stories that he had gotten first hand from the participants themselves.

By comparison, 90AD (later than the dates usually assigned to the writing of Matthew, Mark, and Luke) was only sixty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. There were certainly some of Jesus' original disciples still alive at the time, as there were many more disciples than just the twelve.

Papias wrote a five-volume account of what Jesus said¹ and did in the early second-century, perhaps 110AD or so. In it, Papias speaks of an earlier time when he was busy collecting the oral reports of Jesus' life and work. This was about 80AD, roughly the time of the writing of Matthew and Luke, but perhaps 15 years or more after the writing of Mark's gospel.

continued in the page three textbox

1. Regrettably, Papias' entire work hasn't survived the centuries. We have portions of it, some of which is quoted in the work of others.

from his bondage to sin.¹ When the man was set down on the floor of the room, Jesus told him that his sins had been forgiven, not that his paralysis had been healed.

It is important to grasp the significance and the shock in what Jesus told the paralytic. Sins are offenses committed against God; thus, for the Jews, it was only the LORD God, who could forgive sins. Further, the Jews had a perfectly fine system for managing sin forgiveness and that was the temple, not some dusty house in Capernaum.

So, as the paralyzed man lay on the floor and the befuddled friends peered down through the hole in the roof, some of the religious authorities (in this case, some scribes) jumped on Jesus about his claim to be forgiving the man's sins. Didn't Jesus understand that he was claiming to exercise a power reserved to God.

Of course Jesus understood. He knew exactly what he was doing. But he also knew that anyone could utter the words, "Your sins are forgiven." So, in order that everyone would see that he was not just saying the words but had been given the authority by God to forgive sins, Jesus told the paralytic to get up and walk. It had to be a delayed yet welcome relief for the man and his friends.

I wonder what was running through the once-paralyzed man's head as he walked outside the house to meet up with his friends. Was he thinking about the fact that he was WALKING!? Was he thinking about what his friends had done for him? Through the roof! Was he thinking about the man he had just met? All he had wanted was to walk again but he had gotten far more than that. To what sort of life would he return? What sort of man was returning?

*How far would we go for a friend?
Would we cut through the roof to
introduce a friend to Jesus?
Would we say deal or no deal?*

¹Our bondage to sin and our freedom in Christ was the subject of last week's background study, "Freedom From & Freedom For." That study, like all 250+ of the studies, can be downloaded at www.standrewacademy.org.

Eyewitnesses and the Gospel of Mark (*cont. from the page two textbox*)

Papias, who was personally acquainted with the prophesying daughters of Philip the evangelist (see Acts 8 & 21:8-9), wrote that he sought to hear “those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from truth itself.” As often as he could, Papias spoke with those who had learned directly from disciples who had since died. He also was able to speak directly with those who were learning from two of Jesus’ disciples who were still living at the time: John the Elder (not the John of the gospels) and Aristion. Given the emphasis in the ancient world on the value of eyewitness accounts and perspectives, none of Papias’ work is surprising. He is trying to get as close to the original disciples of Jesus as time and geography will allow him. Eusebius, the early church historian and no fan of Papias’, even claims that Papias actually met with both John the Elder and Aristion.

The point of all this is that in the writings of these early Christians we can learn a great deal about the writing of the gospels. They knew the importance of getting things right. Like Luke, and as expected by the standards of the time, Papias sought to get as close to the actual eyewitnesses as he possibly could, for it is this eyewitness testimony that would be valued most highly by his readers. Papias valued “the living and surviving voice” over what he could find in books or other written materials.” For the ancients, it was better to spend time with a teacher than to read it in a book.

Papias, like others of those early centuries, record that Mark was the interpreter of Peter. Papias asserts that Mark did a good job of writing down Peter’s narratives about Jesus but not so good a job of turning them into a cohesive and artistic whole. Many scholars put the writing of Mark’s gospel in the mid-60’s AD and Richard Bauckham makes a strong case for Peter’s participation in the writing of the gospel. Further, Bauckham suggests that this Mark is the “John Mark” of Acts and the “Mark” of Paul’s letters, a prominent Christian in the early movement who was so well-known he didn’t need any other identifier.

Thus, for Papias, Mark’s approach is, as Bauckham puts it, “praiseworthy because he puts readers into direct touch with Peter’s oral teaching” about Jesus. Mark’s gospel is the unadorned presentation of stories about Jesus, lacking any long blocks of Jesus’ teaching. It is an action-oriented gospel, perhaps reflecting Peter’s own personality. You might even try hearing Peter’s voice as you read today’s story from Mark’s gospel.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JULY 8 - 14

Sunday, Daniel 1 Where is the book of Daniel set? When? Who are Daniel and his friends? What choices are they offered? What do you think is the biggest temptation set before them? Why does Daniel reject the royal food? What are the consequences?

Monday, Daniel 2:1-23 This story sets up a contest between whom? How does Daniel’s challenge differ from Joseph’s when he has to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh (Genesis 40 & 41)? Who reveals the dream to Daniel? What is his response?

Tuesday, Daniel 2:24-49 How would you summarize Nebuchadnezzar’s dream? What is the interpretation given to Daniel and passed on to the king?

Wednesday, Daniel 3 What do you think is the main point of this story? Do the three young men know the outcome before they go into the furnace? Read 3:16-18. Why do you think they are willing to step into the fire? What does this story say to us about trusting God?

Thursday, Daniel 5 After Nebuchadnezzar was reduced to an animal-like existence (chapter 4), the humbling of the king continues, but this time it is the son, Belshazzar. His empire will not stand because he does not honor the true sovereign. What role does Daniel play at the feast? Can you see how it is we have the expression about being unable to see the writing on the wall? What does the expression mean? What do the words written on the Babylonian wall mean?

Friday, Daniel 6 Now Daniel is plotted against. Why is he tossed in with the lions? How is Daniel saved? What do you think is the overarching theme of the stories in the first six chapters.

Saturday, Daniel 7:1-14 The literary genre of the book now changes. Chapters 7-12 are apocalyptic writing, very similar to the book of Revelation. Against the threat and chaos of the opening vision, we see the throne of God. The Son of Man (read the translation footnote for verse 13) is presented before God as the one who will defeat the threats and end the chaos. Many times, Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man (see Mark 2:7, e.g.).

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Read the story from Mark closely. What is said or implied about the paralyzed man's faith? Bear in mind that this man would be a bit of an outcast in the community, as the ancient Jews, along with all ancient peoples (and many still today), believed that such an affliction was brought on by something that the man had done wrong – i.e., the paralysis was like a billboard announcing "SINNER" to everyone who saw him.

What is said or implied about the friends' faith? What do you think motivated them to go to such lengths for their paralyzed friend?

How far would you go for an ill friend? For a friend who is physically well but does not know Jesus? What would hold you back from introducing a friend to Jesus? Do you think that we go as far as we could? Is St. Andrew an inviting congregation? Passively (we're welcoming when they get here) or actively (we go out and invite them in)?

2. In her commentary on Mark in the *New Interpreters Bible*, PHEME PERKINS writes:

"Jesus began his ministry with an attack on the powers of demonic possession and illness (1:21-45). The approach of God's rule meant healing of severe physical afflictions, which separated persons from the larger human community. In this story, another barrier falls: that of sin. Resistance to Jesus' words and actions of forgiveness shows that the separation of the sinner from God is not the only barrier created by sin. Humans divide themselves into categories of "righteous" and "sinners," but Jesus rejects that division. The "righteous" think they know the conditions under which persons may expect to receive mercy from God. Those who experience God's mercy and compassion are already trying to shape their lives by God's law. Their desire for holiness is not wrong. The failure occurs when the scribes mistake Jesus' ministry to sinners as blasphemous disregard for God's holiness."

Do we try to separate people into categories of "righteous" and "sinner?" How do we go about it? Do you think this is common among Christians? If so, why is it such a temptation? How do you practice forgiveness?