

Jesus Heals a Paralyzed Man (Downtown)

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Preacher: Heidi Mills

[0:00] Good evening, everyone. As Jocelyn said, I am Heidi Mills, and I'm the Director of Community here at the table. And I also am privileged to serve as intern here, where I kind of get to see all the things related to this church, which is really cool.

And I am also honored to be on the preaching team. And as I prepared to preach, I am always trying to figure out how my life intersects with Scripture.

Because it can seem as though Scripture happened so long ago that it has no relation to our regular life. And I really struggled with that, with the passage that we will be reading today.

We are in the Gospel of Mark. We are finally in Chapter 2. We're out of Chapter 1. And here we are going to read a healing story about a healing of a paralytic who is carried by his four friends to the roof of a house, and he's lowered down, and he is healed.

And this miraculous healing often seems so much in contrast with what I have seen in my life. For those of you who may not know that much about the church calendar, Monday and Tuesday were All Saints and All Souls Day, respectively.

[1:21] And these are days in the church calendar where we recognize and appreciate those who have passed on, those who have died. And I have experienced throughout my time at work and just over the past couple of months some really difficult deaths that I have really struggled and my communities have really struggled to reconcile these deaths and kind of move on from them.

It seems like there is so much loss and grief around us and so much lack of healing. This was really also brought home to me because I don't know how many of you are familiar with Rachel Held Evans at all.

Rachel Held Evans at all. Oh, yes. Yeah. She was a very influential Christian thinker who, for those of us who maybe had questions about our faith or questioning our evangelical upbringing, she came alongside us, took us by the hand, and said, come, this is a faith that is true and real and right.

but unfortunately her life was cut short in a very sudden way. She came down with the flu. She had some side effects due to that. She went to the hospital, was put in a self-induced coma and she died at the age of 38 and she left behind her son, I mean her son, her daughter, her husband, and so many of us who are influenced by her. And so this idea of the lack of healing seems so strangely jarring compared to the sudden healing of the paralytic that doesn't really happen to us today. So my sermon today will be somewhat of an answer to that question of how does the healing in this story relate to us today? In this story, we will understand that Jesus redefines what healing is and what healing is for. That is the main point of the sermon. If Hillary could pop it up on the screen as I read. Yes. So I will be reading Mark chapter 2 and you can pull it up on your screen or just like listen to it. Try to put yourself in this scene. Beginning in verse 1.

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So 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. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man carried by four of them.

[4 : 18] And 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. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven. Now, some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God alone? At 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?

Which is easier to say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven, or to say, stand up and take your mat and walk. But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he said to the paralytic, I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home. And 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. In this story, the thing that immediately draws me in is this imagery, right? Of these four friends lowering the paralytic down. For those of us who have heard this story, it can seem kind of familiar, like, oh, they just lower him down on the roof. But imagine that you were there, you are crowded in this tiny, tiny room, listening to this man preach.

And then all of a sudden, you like, hear something on the roof. And you're like, is someone up there? That's weird. And then you hear, like, strange, like, thumping noise. And then sounds of, like, shoveling. And then dirt starts falling down on your head. And Jesus is still preaching, obviously, because Jesus will just go on forever. And then all of a sudden, a hole opens up in the roof.

And these men are lowered, lowering this man down. It is a dramatic scene of the lengths these people will go to, to secure healing for their friend. There is nothing that they would not do.

So that is the first aspect of healing that we see in this passage. Healing happens in community. These four friends were really the only resources this paralyzed man had. He obviously could not move, but in the Old Testament, he, in the Old Testament, people who had any sort of disability or disease or anything like that were considered unclean. The book of Leviticus actually tells us that anyone who even had a broken arm or a broken leg were not permitted to enter the temple.

[7 : 10] So this man really had nowhere to go. But he had these friends who were willing to drop everything to do whatever they could to secure healing for this man.

To connect this to my own experience, I want to show you a tapestry that we have hanging up at work. For those of you who may not know me, this is your first time here. I came to D.C. a couple years ago to work at a medical respite facility for homeless individuals with HIV. We were originally founded as a hospice, but thankfully, since medication has gotten better, people are living and we are helping them in the course of healing as they move on to their lives. But you'll see in the upper right-hand corner that this was inspired by the image of the paralyzed man. You see the man in the center surrounded by people, surrounded by what might be angels. And this is a reflection of the fact that no one walks through the doors of my work without this network of support around them. Everyone at my work has some, every resident rather, who comes in has some form of acute physical or mental challenge, more often than not both. Most have HIV, most deal with some sort of schizophrenia or mental health challenge. But somewhere along the way, they had an advocate, they had a family or a friend, they had a nurse or a doctor or a therapist or a psychiatrist or someone who was willing to pick them up and carry them and get them the help that they needed.

This is also something that is reflected in my own life. A couple years ago, I felt in a way similar to that paralyzed man. I received a phone call from my sister that absolutely shattered my world. It's a bit too much of a story to go into the specifics. But I remember what I was trying to eat. I remember where I was when I got this phone call. And I remember that feeling of my world shifting off its axis. Like I thought I knew the direction of my life, but it was not the case. And I remember being absolutely devastated. To give a little bit of more detail, it was a division between my dad and my sister and all of the consequences of a family kind of breaking down. And so when I received that phone call, I am kind of a private and a guarded person. So when I'm going through something, it's really hard for me to figure out how to seek help, to seek people who will come alongside me and pick me up. But in that moment, I realized that I needed to seek that help. I reached out to my roommates who saw me cry, saw me broken down. I reached out to my work community and to my dinner party. And from that experience, I realized that I was not actually alone. And I realized the importance of going to therapy. So I decided to go to therapy for the first time. And I can tell you that that is easily one of the best decisions I've ever made in my entire life. So I tell that story for the point of expressing that none of us heal alone, and none of us have to. There are always going to be people there that will help us through those rough times when we feel like we can't move. And I know that there are people in this community, this church community that will be those people for you, because I've experienced that myself. So I want you to identify those people who will carry you when you can't move to figure out maybe it's one person, maybe it's a group of people, but we all have someone. And it's also important for us to recognize and identify what it might mean to be that person for someone else. When I go back to the scripture, one thing that always sticks out to me is in verse five, when it says that Jesus sought their faith. Now, this could include like the man and his friends, but I don't think it necessarily has to. I think that maybe the four friends believed in the possibility of the man's healing before he did. And the same is true for us. Sometimes there are people who can believe in the possibility of our own healing before we believe in it ourselves.

And so given that, we start to see Jesus address this man to heal him. Yet this healing does not take the form that the crowd expected. They expected a physical healing. But that's not what Jesus does. Instead, he says, son, your sins are forgiven. Now, this one word, son, probably had such tremendous significance for him. I can tell you from my own experience that if you maybe have a difficult relationship with your own family, that there is nothing more healing and transformative than that moment when someone chooses you as part of their family. So this leads me to my second point about healing. Healing reminds us of our identity and our intrinsic worth in God's sight. What the man really needed beyond a physical healing was an affirmation of his identity. And that's the source of his true healing. The crowd wanted a physical healing, partly because they believed that the man had likely brought this on himself, that he was disabled because of sin. That was the conception of disability and illness in the time in which this was written. And we can see this kind of in the scribes' thought process.

They're like, who does he think he is? He's not God. And besides, like, you can clearly see this man is paralyzed. So how can his sins be forgiven? They thought that he had sinned or his parents had sinned, and that's why he was paralyzed. But that's not the case. By healing the man, by forgiving his sins, Jesus is actually breaking that link between sin, disability, and illness. He is declaring that this man is worthy just as he is. He doesn't have to jump through hoops. He doesn't need to fit this mold.

[14 : 25] All he needs to do is come in front of Jesus. An essential part of this scripture for me is that Jesus is forgiving sins before he dies on the cross. Some of us may have heard that the cross was necessary in order for God to forgive us. However, God has been willing and able to forgive our sins all along. We didn't need him to die a brutal death on the cross for that to happen. Instead, the cross is this final manifestation of the lengths to which God will go to declare God's love for us, even to the point of death. For me, I struggle with this concept of forgiveness in a lot of ways. When I make a mistake, even if it's a small one, I kind of get locked into this cycle of self-degradation and just being really down on myself, really hard on myself. Like, why would I make that mistake? I know better. It can be hard for me to forgive myself. So accepting God's forgiveness is often hard. I don't want to talk too much more about forgiveness in this sermon, but I want you to go back and listen to Lexi's sermon from this morning at gala, because she really digs into this idea of forgiveness and what forgiveness really means.

And I think it would be wonderful for anyone to go back and watch that. But for me, forgiveness is linked with this idea of healing, this deep soul-level healing that reminds us who we've always been in God's sight. Forgiveness is the reminder that there is nothing we can do that will separate us from the love of God. That's what the man needed that day, and that's also what we need. We live in a world that tends to equate our worth with our usefulness, with our ability to produce, to be this effective machine in this capitalistic society to work ourselves so hard in order to earn our worth.

But that's not what we need to do. That's not how God sees us. We are worthy just as we are. Many of us are struggling with our mental health right now, with those voices that try to remind us that we are not enough. But I want you to try to find what affirms that voice of God in your life.

What is that voice that reminds you that you are forgiven? For me, that is therapy. When I can cry on the phone to my therapist, or I can vent about something difficult that's happening, or a mistake that I made, and I find that voice of complete and total acceptance and knowing of myself. For others of you, it might be choosing to go on medication. It could be finding a friend to talk to when maybe that is the hardest thing you've ever done, reaching out to that one person.

There are so many ways for us to find that voice of truth. It doesn't always look like a come to Jesus moment of like, we pray and we read our Bible and that's what heals us. There are so many ways for you to hear that voice of healing. And so try to find that in the course of your life this week.

[17 : 54] But I want to examine more closely this question of the scribes. They ask, why does Jesus speak like that? Only God can forgive sins. And Jesus, being Jesus, kind of asks an impossible question in return.

He asks, which is easier, to tell a man his sins are forgiven, or to tell him to stand up, take up his mat, and walk? Now, I don't know how many of you are familiar with the Princess Bride at all.

But I, every time I read this, I think of this certain scene from the Princess Bride, if Hillary wants to put the meme up. Yeah. Yeah.

There's no way for the scribes to win. I mean, they think that there's only one answer to that. But in reality, Jesus goes on to say, hey, I can do both. Like, just watch me. Because the scribes do not believe that Jesus has forgiven the man's sins, Jesus proceeds to heal the man physically. And by doing that, he is declaring who he is. He is saying that, I am the God who can forgive sins, and I am the God who can heal physically. And that's what the scribes would have heard right. Because they said, only God can forgive sins. And Jesus doesn't dispute that. He would agree that only God can forgive sins. And he goes ahead and shows them that that's what he did. And so for point three, healing restores us to new life.

Now, I don't want you to get the impression from this sermon that the man was only healed, was only whole after he was healed from his disability. That's not the point of this sermon. There have been so many ways that this scripture has kind of been used, either implicitly or explicitly to harm folks with disabilities.

[20 : 14] And I already mentioned that Jesus has already broken this link between sin and disability by forgiving the man's sins. So the man was already whole. The man was already seen as worthy just as he was when he was still paralyzed. So the link between sin and disability is no longer there.

And Jesus also did not do this without the consent of the man. We can see that Jesus either, I mean, the way I like to see it is that Jesus is very intuitive. Like he saw the faith of the friends. He saw that the scribes were questioning in their hearts. So he has a way of knowing and seeing people. And so he looks at the paralyzed man. He realizes that this man actually wants this physical healing. He would not have done it if it was not for the consent of the man. It was something he did with the man, not just to him. But finally, I just want to situate this within the historical context, where pretty much the only way for someone to receive new life, to fully participate in the society, was if they fit this able-bodied mold. There wasn't any of our options for them. So we have to consider that context. We also have to put it within our context and realize that this form of miraculous healing doesn't happen. And often it may not even be necessary. We have to consider what healing means in our lives. And healing, to me, looks like creating space and access with disabled folks so that they can live abundant lives.

It's not about trying to get them to fit this able-bodied mold. It's about solidarity and support and creating a society where everyone can flourish. This takes different forms, whether awakening to the realities of chronic illness, and structuring our society to have more remote work opportunities without needing a pandemic to force us into that.

It could look like destigmatizing mental health. It could look like, yeah, destigmatizing suicide ideation and making sure that we are creating societies where people who are feeling that way have all the resources and love and support that they need.

It can also look like hearing from the people who are hard of hearing, or deaf, or wheelchair-bound, and creating a society where people can live full and abundant lives just as they were created to be, and not try to force them into this able-bodied mold or shut them out just because they do not fit the typical mold.

[23 : 17] So that leads me to the central point of what healing is. True healing happens when everyone is able to thrive precisely as the person God created them to be.

And when we find a way to accomplish that, even in small ways, that is what healing truly looks like.

And that was true for Jesus' time, and that is true for us today. I want to end the sermon in a typical way with an invitation and a challenge.

But then I will also want to offer an encouragement at the end. So the invitation. How is God bringing healing to your life?

What are some things you can point to and you're like, that is God working on me. That is God healing me. If it is hard for you to think of that, and I totally understand if that is the case, maybe write down an affirmation or start a gratitude practice.

[24 : 23] Something like that. Something that affirms your worth in God's sight. But then the challenge is to find some small way to bring healing to someone else this week.

For me, I have found that God works in the mundane as well as the miraculous. Those small moments of connection are often the most important.

And it doesn't have to be anything huge. It could be having a conversation with someone you wouldn't normally have a conversation with. Reaching out to someone who you maybe know is struggling, but you don't know the right words to say.

I can say for myself that often the words that I need to hear the most are just, I am here for you. And that in itself is healing. That said, I have been thinking a lot about how there may be someone in this congregation right now, or watching online, or maybe watching after, and you are in the darkest place you've ever been.

You maybe feel like there is no hope, no possibility of healing. This is probably the case because I have had moments like that myself, where I have come to church and sat in a chair, and I have felt so broken and so alone and just wanting someone to be there for me.

[25 : 48] And one of the things that has been most healing for me in that moment was hearing from the stage that I see you. To know that, yes, you may be in the darkest place you've ever been, but that's not the end of the road, and we are here for you.

So if you are in that place, I want you to know that I'm speaking to you directly when I say that you are dearly and completely loved for exactly who you are, and your presence in this world matters.

And if you are in a place where you are maybe trying to seek help and you don't know where to turn to, I want you to know that this church is a safe place, and we aspire to be that for everyone who walks through the doors.

And there is no shame in seeking help on your journey of healing, no matter where you are, if you're in a good place or in a not good place. There is never any shame in seeking help and seeking community as you journey toward healing.