

Sermon – January 26, 2020
Stand Up and Walk!
Mark 2: 1-12

Interruptions – who needs them? Not when your life is at its peak! Not when you're healthy and strong and enjoying fame and fortune. Certainly not when you're in the midst of a speaking engagement. It was a matter of serious concern, a major interruption, if you wish. Jesus was teaching in Simon's house in Capernaum. The house was packed with people. Wall to wall. Even the door was blocked. It's impossible to go in or get out. People gathered in tightly; they listened intently, and most of all, they watched very, very carefully. There was no way they were going to miss listening to Jesus. He was like a celebrity who had come to town and the people eagerly waits for his next trick. On the front row, in the "reserved spots" were the leaders of the temple, the VIPs in town, most of whom were there to check out this Jesus, to see if he was there to cause any more trouble.

Meanwhile, outside the house, another drama unfolds. A group of four friends carrying a man approached the door and couldn't get in. People were jammed in the door. Next, they tried looking for windows – those too were blocked. There was no way they can get in through the door or by the windows. The four men had a mission. They need to bring their friend to meet Jesus and get healed. Their friend, you see, was a paralytic. He couldn't walk; he couldn't stand; he had to be carried. This is the right moment after years of failed healing attempts and broken hopes. They've heard of this man Jesus and his healing hands. They will do their hardest to get in even if it would cause a major interruption.

Inside the house, Jesus was about to begin his teaching antics, when suddenly sounds of shovel digging or hammer pounding were heard. Dust began to fall, then little pieces of dried mud and soon it was as though a major renovation was taking place. You can imagine the looks of horror and surprise from the crowd as they began to realize that somebody was digging into the roof - taking the roof apart! These Capernaum houses were only one story and had a flat roof, accessible by a staircase on the outside of the building. The roofs were also used for work as well as for sleeping. They were held together by mud with wood beams or branches as the structural part of the roof. This is why, in our story, the four men literally had to dig up the roof.

Light flooded down upon the room where Jesus was standing and out of it came a stretcher lowered from the roof by the four men. The crowd pushed back. Jesus stopped. As Jesus stood there staring up at the sky, he still couldn't believe his eyes, and it was as if he was seeing the sky for the first time. In a way, I'm sure, the crowd looked up too. Even if it was the same old sky that they'd always looked at, Jesus and the crowd were seeing it through a whole new perspective. And then, there before Jesus, there lays a man on the stretcher, motionless, obviously a paralytic. The people were aghast at the intrusion. How could they ever do this? I'm sure Simon was mad of what the four men did to his roof. Now he will have to find ways to fix it. If this happened in today's world, the guy and his friends probably should have been sued for damages. Imagine if this happened here at BCUC – when the new roof had just been installed. Imagine how the members of our hardworking property committee would feel if someone opened up a hole on the roof. Imagine how the diligent members of our roof fundraising committee would feel if another campaign was to be held. I'm sure we don't need another roof repair. This is not what we need at the moment.

If the crowd saw damage and repair and got upset with the four men, Jesus saw their faith and persistence. Jesus saw that this paralytic has a community who supports him, who rallies beside him – friends who wanted the paralytic to stand up and walk, to move back to the community as a normal human being, to be transformed, to be healed. As the leaders of the temple surveyed the situation, perhaps waiting for Jesus's reaction, they did not expect the next act. Jesus didn't even mention the roof. Jesus did not reprimand the four men who caused the damage. All he did was marvel at their faith, wowed by their courage and persistence they seemed to display. Ben Witherington describes the demonstration of their faith this way: *"They dared to do the difficult, the dangerous, the controversial in order to bring their friend into the presence of Jesus"*.

It seems to me that Jesus handled the situation with amazing calm. Jesus said to the man on the stretcher, "Son, your sins are forgiven". Really, Jesus? is this story about forgiveness? First of all, there was the issue about the roof. Secondly, the four men's mission was to see that their friend, the paralytic, be healed! They wanted him to stand, roll up his mat and walk. What do you mean Jesus when you said "Son, your sins are forgiven?" Jesus surely was amazing! If he addresses the paralytic, Son, Jesus here is declaring that he has a relationship with this paralyzed

man. Jesus knew that the paralytic needs to be freed not only from his physical tragedy of not being able to walk, but also of his marginalized situation of being a nobody in the community. Jesus sees him as part of the human family no matter what.

The common understanding of sin at the time of Jesus was that of a cause and effect. Sin caused suffering and suffering must be the result of God's punishment or God's judgement. Being disabled, the paralytic would have most likely been in extreme poverty. There was no access to any kind of healthcare system and being paralyzed meant he was not able to work. So he probably was a beggar or dependent on the generosity of family and friends, who may or may not have had resources to help him. There is some evidence too that to be a full member of the synagogue, one had to be physically whole - not blind, not lame, not a leper. This is because, whether through sickness, sin or something else, he would have been thought of as ritually unclean. By saying, "your sins are forgiven," Jesus confronts the injustice that this man had faced all his life. Jesus offers the paralytic the gift of shalom. Not only was Jesus restoring his physical health but also giving him a renewed membership in the community, in the synagogue, in the human family.

But the religious leaders were angry. They were mad at Jesus for saying things about forgiveness that for them only God could do. For them, it was blasphemous what he had done. Jesus was not deterred by their reactions. Jesus showed them that God was right there when the roof crumbled in their midst. God was not above them but with them – below on the floor. No longer was there a separation between God and God's people. Jesus knew they could not see clearly what was right in front of them, so he invited the paralytic man to stand up, roll up his mat and walk his way home. Jesus did this so they could see . . . so the crowd could see – so the religious leaders could see – so the four men and the paralytic could see - that the situation in front of them was more than a hole in the roof; it was more than a healing moment - it was an encounter with God.

Where and who are you in this story? Are you one of the four friends whose faith, courage and persistence push them to dig up the roof so the barrier to acts of love, compassion and justice could be crushed? Are you the paralytic, whose openness to be healed made him whole through an encounter with Jesus? Are you one of the crowd willing to listen, willing to be open to recognizing God's moment when it happens? Are you the religious leaders who care deeply for their tradition but who are not open to seeing God's moment in new ways? Are you Jesus who

accepts the other, who confronts the injustice and find ways to be a true healer? What do we do with a story like this? Personally, I see this story as an eye opener, a possibility where the intrusion of the four friends and the paralytic, does not disrupt the work of God but rather gives new opportunities to proclaim it. Digging holes make you and I vulnerable to the unexpected, often unwelcomed, new moments of God's presence. Through these holes in the roof, we are able to see the light of God's intervention shining through. This story shows us that sometimes we need to start digging - to dig up whatever barriers, whatever obstacles that may stand in the way of people and places being made whole. We as the body of Christ has the responsibility to address the social evils – to confront every injustice that make others crippled and lame and paralyzed. Paralysis comes in many forms. It could be physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, systemic. There are people in our community, in this congregation, in our family that are "paralyzed" - unable to move – stagnant - stuck. Jesus calls us to know what keeps them that way and do something about it. What is the mat that they live on? that carries them? How can we help them to stand, roll up their mats and walk? As followers of Jesus, we are tasked to take a stand so those who could not walk or maimed by poverty or marginalization or those who are spiritually disturbed may be able to stand up and walk again.

It was a little later, after the stormy episode had calmed down and the paralytic had stood to his feet, rolled up his mat, and headed home—healed and whole—that the crowd recovered from their stunned silence. It was in that moment that they realize that the story they'd just witnessed was so much more than a reckless act of vandalism - so much more than a hole in the roof! What they saw was the transformation of a whole human life . . . right in front of their eyes. In fact, as they pulled themselves together and the crowd began to disperse, they whispered among themselves, “We never saw anything like this!”. As you go home today and reflect on this story, treasure those moments of intrusion, when the roofs are torn apart and God's light descends on us and we rise from where we are to work for hope and justice. Remember these inspiring words by Leonard Cohen: “There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.” Amen.

Sources: BCUC Lectionary Group
Amy Butler, sermonwriter.com