

Here are the links to the video version of the service for Sunday February 21, 2021:

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The Healing Power of Forgiveness
Mark 2:1-12
February 21, 2021

There is a fairly common perception among the world's religions and even in our modern society that forgiveness has to be earned. The ancient word "penance" which is still found among modern Catholics remains a powerful symbol of this attitude. We have to pay off our sins by works of penitence.

You may remember the 80's film **The Mission**. Jeremy Irons plays a Spanish Jesuit who goes into the South American wilderness to build a mission in the hope of converting the Indians of the region. Robert DeNiro plays Mendoza, a slave hunter, who kills his brother in a fit of rage because he has stolen the woman he loved. Through the priest's guidance Mendoza is challenged to engage in a brutal penance. We watch his agonizing climb up the cliffs hauling a large bundle. For him it is an attempt to pay for his terrible sin. Once he finally arrives at the summit he collapses in tears, his heart finally softened. To us it looks suspiciously like Mendoza is bearing his own cross up that mountain side in order to atone for his sin. Does forgiveness come to us through our effort or is it a gift?

Walter Brueggemann in his book, **Finally Comes the Poet**, speaks about modern listeners to sermons that come to church with layer upon layer of alienation resulting from sin, sins which are experienced as guilt. Among us is a yearning for release, a desperate hope that forgiveness and healing are possible. But alienation and guilt have lingered so long within our psyche that we have been forced to bury it out of sight.

Mark tells us that Jesus has returned home, possibly the same home of Peter's in Capernaum. Is there a suggestion here that he is once again ritually clean after touching the leper? Perhaps!

Mark and Luke have Jesus teaching in the home, while Matthew has it happening outside. It does seem unlikely that a crowd could fit into a typical small room of a Capernaum home. But it certainly makes the story more dramatic. Friends carry the paralytic on a stretcher bed to Jesus. Jesus will commend them for their faith. Whether the paralytic had faith, or even wanted to be carried to Jesus, we just don't know.

In Mark we have already seen Jesus' power to heal. But in Mark's and Luke's account, because they can't get in because of the crowd, they climb up on the flat roof and make a dramatic entrance through the hole they dig. Can you imagine the disruption this must have caused? No matter how riveted they were by Jesus' teaching, they would have heard the commotion above them. Branches swishing through the air, dirt falling on your head and the sky suddenly opening up would have distracted the group around Jesus. And then the sky is blocked by a pallet being lowered into the room and people back away to make room. You are standing there right next to the man on the pallet. His eyes are wide with fear, puzzled no doubt by what is going on. Jesus doesn't seem to mind the interruption.

This is not a good day for him. His quiet life of begging on one of the busy market corners in Capernaum has been turned upside down. All he had to deal with before were pesky insects, cheeky children and stingy villagers who sometimes shouted abuse at him. Now here he is in the middle of a house, surrounded by people he knows and others he doesn't know, and among them were local scribes. Is it possible that at this point he might have wished for his usual spot where he begged?

Let's be honest, it's not easy to step out into the unknown world of forgiveness, grace, and Jesus. It's much easier to stay within the familiar world, even if it is a world clouded by inner guilt, sin and loss. It is after all the world we know and have got used to. We may be numb, but even we ourselves have succeeded in hiding the power of this numbness from ourselves. Why invite the prospect of confronting our inner demons by welcoming Jesus' healing, forgiving presence

into our hearts? To turn to him will demand change. Many simply stay on their pallets and avoid the work that inner healing demands.

But this is not a straightforward healing miracle story. For some reason that we cannot know Jesus looks at this man and sees something deep within him that prompts him to address his spiritual malady, not his physical ailment. Jesus simply says that his sins are forgiven. He literally says to the poor soul lying in front of him, *take heart son, your sins are forgiven*. Or to paraphrase it, *cheer up, my child, everything will be well*.

The verb translated “forgive” here means “send away”. His sins are sent away! Reminds us of the scapegoat that is sent away into the wilderness carrying Israel’s sins. Now for the paralytic this doesn’t seem terribly helpful. He can’t walk and he is told his sins have walked away!

Is it possible that Mark is telling us that our sins are the profound reason for our sickness? Surely not! While it is true that elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus is at pains to say that there is no necessary connection between our sins and our sicknesses, here obviously the door is opened to this possibility. But is there sometimes a connection between our psychological state and our health? Is there a connection between our sins and our physical maladies? I wonder! Experts have argued that prayer, meditation, regular worship and disciplined lifestyle do affect our overall health of body and mind. In short, we are slowly opening the door in medical science to the inter-relationship between spirit and body and the effect of one upon the other.

People in Jesus’ day would automatically assume that sickness is a sign of the god’s punishment for sins. As Philip Yancey says in his book, **The Jesus I Never Knew**: *You can view disease as a mechanical breakdown of bodily cells, or you can view it in a broader sense as a state of dis-ease involving body, mind, and soul*.

Very often our physical condition is dependant on our spiritual state. When I was a young minister in a small village in Ontario, I saw this happening before my eyes. One of my elders was a senior manager in a local company. He had spent years working his way up the

management ladder. One day, without warning, he was laid off. It was a devastating blow to both him and his wife. But it was his wife who suffered most. Within a week of this crisis her stomach swelled up and she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. All the evidence pointed to the emotional trauma as the trigger for this sickness to manifest itself. Within a few months she died.

In Dicken's ***Great Expectations***, Miss Havisham who was jilted at the altar, insists on wearing her wedding dress for the rest of her life. There is her wedding cake still sitting on the table where it was placed for the celebration. She is frozen into immobility by her anger and grief and loss. It's a sad picture to see her once beautiful dress now falling to pieces while the cake looks black with mold and covered by little crawling creatures. Her inability to forgive and move on has left her frozen in the past. Queen Victoria is a real life vivid example of grief weighing a person down, unable to accept the early death of her beloved Albert.

I remember talking to a woman whose own son had hurt her twenty-five years before and because of this they hadn't seen each other or talked since. She could pass him in the mall and they would ignore each other. The bitterness and hardness that such ruptures cause in people is quite staggering. I believe the mother was profoundly affected by this bitterness till the day she died. How awful that forgiveness is so impossible, even within families.

The scribes are whispering among themselves and Jesus perceives their horror at his claim of standing in the place of God. How can he forgive sins? He says to them: *Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Rise and take your mat and walk'?* What he says is: ***Which is easier, to send his sins on their way, or to send him on his way?*** Well, which is easier? Jesus is basically saying that he has the power to do both, make him walk and forgive sins! Jesus then turns to the paralytic and says: ***Rise and take your mat and go home.*** Our translation simply says: *And he stood up.* The Greek behind this phrase is the same word throughout the New Testament for ***resurrected!*** He walked out a new person. And everyone in the room was both astonished and glorified God at the same time.

I wonder who we identify with in this story? Are we among the villagers who marvel at Jesus' words and his healing powers and glorify God because of what they hear and see? Indeed, I know I have witnessed the transforming, healing power of grace, faith and forgiveness in my own life and in the life of others. The power of that forgiveness is almost impossible to shake off. Sometimes, I know, we are tempted by circumstances to identify with the religious scribes who were offended by his claim to heal and forgive sins. Too often, it is true, when our faith has wavered so much that we don't know where we stand with Jesus' claim on our life. Or perhaps we are like the four friends looking down in absolute joy and wonder from the roof. Jesus responded to their faith. They really believed in his powers to heal. Their faith moves Jesus to action. Who do you identify with this morning?

Amen