

WORSHIP

Sermon | 2.9.2020



Back to Basics: Outreach

The Reverend Pen Peery

Mark 2:1-12

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. 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!’

+ + +

Today we continue our sermon series called “Back to Basics” where we have been exploring some of the foundations of our faith. We’ve talked about the purpose



of the church, the importance of membership, and what happens in worship. Today our focus is on what we are trying to do when we reach out in mission.

As a church in the middle of the city – outreach has always been central to our identity. Our mission statement “to be for Christ in the heart of Charlotte” sets us about the work of reaching out our hands to care for the people that Jesus cared so much about: the poor, the marginalized, the broken.

My guess is that is part of the reason why you are here.

It’s why so many of our members drive by other churches that might be closer or more convenient – because rather than faith leading us to avoid the problems of the world and keeping us comfortable, this church believes that our faith compels us to notice...and interact...and address...our city’s and the world’s problems.

There are lots of examples of how our faith leads us to reach out. You can look at our budget to see how we support ministries and agencies beyond our walls to the tune of over 700 thousand dollars. You can learn about things like Loaves and Fishes, or Room in the Inn, or our partnership with Westerly Hills Elementary School. You can go on a variety of mission trips – in our state and around the globe. A number of our classes, and Bible studies, and book clubs are focused on outreach.

For our congregation, I don’t think we need much convincing about **why** outreach is important. What I want to do this morning is spend a little time reflecting on **what we are trying to accomplish** through our outreach. Because as a church, we have a slightly different aim than a non-profit that focuses on a specific issue. Our call is to something deeper.



In our first Scripture from Mark's gospel we heard Jesus calling us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our second Scripture reading is also from Mark's gospel. It's a story about people who demonstrate what that love looks like when it is lived. Listen with me for the word of the Lord. I'm reading from the second chapter of Mark.

+ + +

To my knowledge, when Jesus was going from town to town, preaching and teaching and telling people that the kingdom of God was near, he had not organized his band of followers into committees.

There was no "outreach arm" of the movement. No "task force for fellowship." No "long-range planning group." So when I went looking for a Scripture passage to illumine what the church is trying to do when we reach beyond our walls, I had to exercise some interpretive imagination.

The image that kept coming to my mind were those four friends.

Those four friends: Carrying the paralyzed man, walking up to the house where Jesus was and finding the crowd of people spilling out of the door and into the street, and knowing that the healing that they needed was inside.

Can't you imagine what they may have felt – overwhelmed by just how many people were there in need of what Jesus had to offer, perhaps discouraged by the fact that it wasn't going to be as easy as just showing up and finding help, probably a little anxious to relieve the suffering of their friend – maybe trying to manage *his* disappointment in discovering that the help he thought he would find was still out of reach.



Probably like many of you, through being involved in outreach in the church, I've worked in soup kitchens, helped build Habitat houses, filled buckets of cement to build schools in Mexico, tutored 3rd graders in reading, and been in meetings where we sifted through stacks of excellent grant proposals to help address desperate need in the community that totaled up to an amount that far exceeded our capacity of support.

And I have to say: I am familiar with that feeling those four friends must have had. Of coming face-to-face with the seeming mismatch of an overabundance of need and the scarcity of ways to address it.

Because – as hard as we work – there are always more people to feed. There are always more homeless neighbors to shelter. There are always more children who need support. There are always high impact agencies that need funding.

Perhaps you heard about, or read about, what happened off of Freedom Drive two weeks ago. 975 people lined up in the cold and rain to wait all day outside a new, affordable housing development to apply for 129 spots. And, of course, beyond those 975 people are about 33,000 more families who are in need of an affordable place to live.

I don't know if you saw any pictures of that line – winding its way back and forth across a parking lot: people who had taken off work, and brought their kids, deposit checks in-hand...standing next to the apartment building that held the dream of a place they could call home...but blocked by the crowd.

+ + +

I grant you that it is natural to give into that feeling of being overwhelmed – of



feeling overmatched – like the resources we have to address the problems we face are woefully insufficient – and wondering why it is even worth our effort at all.

But for the church, one of the gifts we bring to the work of outreach is a **faith...a conviction...**that no matter how broken things seem, or how elusive or incremental progress may feel, or how difficult or intractable the problems are, we believe that the brokenness...or sufferings...or injustices **are not what God intends** for our neighbors or our world...and, not only that, we believe that they **are not what God promises** when it comes to our future that rests in God's hands.

At some point – as those four friends stood there, arms tired, looking at the crowd surrounding Jesus' house – something moved them to push past their feelings of discouragement, past the place where the help and healing they sought for their friend felt impossible to attain.

Something happened that caused them to refuse to accept that their friend's suffering would just have to continue for another day – for a more convenient time. So they went around the crowd. And they climbed the wall of the house and hoisted their friend to the roof. And they dug through the thatch in the roof to create enough space for a man lying on a mat. And they, slowly, carefully lowered the mat down so that Jesus could heal.

To be sure – what was obvious in all of that...to the crowd and to Jesus...was that those four had a love of and a commitment to their friend. Empathy and compassion are key ingredients in a ministry of outreach.

But what was also clear was that those four **believed** that Jesus had the **power** to make things right...they **trusted** that Jesus meant what he said



when he told the crowds that the kingdom of God was at hand.

And what Jesus noticed wasn't the interruption to whatever had been going on before...or the new sunlight in his ceiling...

what Jesus noticed was the four friends' faith.

+ + +

With the paralyzed man at his feet, the first thing Jesus does is offer forgiveness. We might think that is a little strange. What the man needed was a cure! What he needed was the strength to use his legs again! But the first words on Jesus' lips were to forgive the paralyzed man for his sins.

Sometimes people take this to mean that Jesus was implying the reason the man was paralyzed was because of his sin. That's a dangerous road to walk – blaming people for what ails them...assuming God works that way. In fact, scholars point out time and time again that in the dozen or so other times Jesus heals people in Mark's gospel, he never connects a person's sin to their physical suffering.

I don't believe Jesus' point in talking about forgiveness was to make the paralyzed man an object lesson on the effects of sin. But I do think that when Jesus saw the man at his feet he saw something more than person suffering from a physical ailment. Jesus perceived that in addition to the man being paralyzed, he also suffered from being distant from God.

So, yes, Jesus did tell the man to get up, and take his mat, and walk.

But he did more. The nature of Jesus' healing goes beyond help.

What Jesus really wants is to make us whole.



And when we do it well – that’s what the church of Jesus Christ is after, too.
We want to help. We want to alleviate suffering. We want to address problems
that plague our communities and our world.

But we want something more.

We want reconciliation. We want repentance and forgiveness. We
want balance. We want peace.

Because that’s what God wants.

And that’s what God promises.

+ + +

The church – like every other organization that seeks to be about the betterment
of our world – does need to pay attention to the places where we can focus. For
us that is in our commitment to support this city’s underserved children and our
desire to be a leader in tending to the community’s mental health.

The church – and our church – needs to support outreach programs that are
proven to work – to lean invest in strategies that have impact – that seek
measurable and positive change.

But beyond outcomes – what we try to do when whenever we reach out to our
neighbors and the world – is make **visible** our faith...

our trust...

our conviction...

that God is not satisfied with brokenness and suffering...

and that by God’s grace and power, we are all moving
toward that promised day when this world reflects what
God intends.



This is, perhaps, our church's most important witness: that we really believe healing and wholeness is possible.

And that we will persistently seek after it – no matter the challenge or the time.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

