

Gracious & Tenacious

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... When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' Mark 2:3-5

Two weeks ago, we noted that after Jesus' amazing transfiguration atop mount Tabor, he mysteriously tells his Apostles to not say a word about it to anyone. In today's Gospel, we see part of the reason why. Jesus has become so popular that people can no longer gather close enough around him to hear what he has to say. Despite his attempts to stay under the radar, the word is out about Jesus. Crowds are thronging around him, clamoring for his attention. These are sick people, needy people, and just plain curious people, and all of them want a little piece of Jesus' time and effort. The sheer amount of their requests and demands must have been overwhelming.

Do any of you know what this is like? Those of you who are moms are familiar with being overwhelmed by the demands of a regular day. The daily average that our kids ask 'Mommy...' must be in the hundreds! Others of us are familiar with the countless demands of a job, or unreasonable expectations of a boss, or the demands of taking care of family who can no longer take care of themselves. Well for Jesus the problem wasn't just that too much was going on, it was also that his popularity brought lots of critics and spectators who were getting in the way of people who really needed him and were ready for him.

The paralyzed man and his four friends in today's Gospel reading were among those who needed to see Jesus, but were having trouble getting through to him. Thank God, though, these men did not throw their hands up and go home when they realize they can't get near Jesus. Indeed, they are so determined to help their friend get to Jesus that they dig through the entire roof to get to him. Through their tenacity, this paralyzed man and his friends become an example of faithful living for the ages; inspiring even to us today.

But let's not skip to the happy ending too quickly. Can you imagine the conversation of these faithful friends when they saw the crowds? "We came all this way, but look at all these people, what can we possibly do." However, before succumbing to despair and giving up, someone, somehow was open to grace; "Hey, what if we sneak behind the house, lift him over our heads, and dig down through the roof?" I'm sure this friend was laughed at. I'm sure the paralyzed man was anxious at the thought of being dropped through the ceiling. I'm sure tempers were short and bodies exhausted after lifting this man for hours. But then another moment of grace, "Why don't we just try it? What have we got to lose?" And lo and behold, they succeed not only in getting their paralyzed friend to Jesus, but in seeing him miraculously healed by the power of God; seeing him stand, take up his mat, and walk.

Now as I always appeal to you, reading this story as just another trick by Jesus the magician, is half the story at best. Jesus' magic, Jesus' grace was a response to the faith and grace of these five men. What was the everyday grace that these men found, and that we might find to reveal the miraculous in our lives? In a word, I would say tenacity-and speaking for myself-I pray for much more of this in my life. If I faced a situation like the friends of the paralytic, to be honest, I would have turned away in frustration when I saw the crowds, or perhaps even before that. I can be tenacious when things are in my interest, but it's harder to be tenacious when it's in service of someone else, of God and the church. How many people, including perhaps yourself at times, have turned away in a similar fashion from seeking Jesus in this church: "Oh, I tried going to church, but it didn't change my life, so I stopped" Or "We used to go to church, but they weren't friendly, or they were hypocrites." Or "I busted my butt for this church, yet no one seemed to appreciate me?" How many times have we tried something once, and then given up when we didn't see immediate results?

Well, these five souls just kept at it until they achieved their goal. But notice that though they were tenacious, they were not stubborn. They didn't insist on their own plan when circumstances prevented it; they were open enough to try a new way, even a crazy way. Now I am sure these men doubted. I am sure they argued. This may have been their third attempt. But they continued on in spite of serious obstacles, remaining open and flexible, and thereby were blessed.

Tenacity is an ordinary grace that we all possess in some portion. In fact, in matters that are important to us, we probably see we have a lot of it. Today's story of the paralytic and his friend remind us to be as tenacious in service to God and others as we are for ourselves. For if we are, we might discover the same blessings that these men did; the forgiveness of our sins, the healing of our tired bodies and spirits and rising up from whatever paralyzes us to follow God to become all he would have us be, now and always; amen.

-This sermon inspired by J. Barrington Bates', sermon "As We Have Worked" 2006