

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 7TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
FEBRUARY 23, 2003

Isaiah 43: 18-19,21-22, 24b-25, Psalm 41 2 Corinthians 1: 18-22 Mark 2: 1-12

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In Mark's gospel Jesus wants to preach the good news ----what the people want is healing from their many infirmities. Can't say that I blame them. When I'm sick, I want to get better. At the first sign of a headache, I pop an aspirin into my mouth; when my stomach is burning, I reach for an antacid. I wonder if these ailments aren't asking me to look a little more deeply into my life. What's causing the headache? Why all the stomach acid? Is it my tendency to do more than I need? Is it my ambition to "shine" among my peers? Is it the drive to earn more so as to have more? Is it sin in one or another shape—greed, aggression, a hunger for power, envy, etc.? Maybe my pain is a symptom of something deeper I should attend. Certainly, much of the pain and sickness of the larger world is a result of sin; either through violence, neglect, manipulation or dishonesty towards others. The gospel miracles, such as today's, point out Jesus' desire to make us well. He wants to heal the source of our sickness and brokenness; he wants to enable us to overcome the alienation, hatred and divisions that so disrupt our world. He wants to forgive our sins and thus bring a deep healing to all who would accept him and his ways. The man in today's story is healed in body and spirit; Jesus wants to tend to the whole person.

The people of Jesus's day made a direct connection between sickness and sin; for them, disease was the result of sin. Jesus did much in his ministry to refute this; but in today's story he seems to use their belief to show his power not just to heal, but to announce God's forgiveness. His words to the paralytic are unambiguous, "Child, your sins are forgiven." He names the man as a "child." A child is dependent on its parents for life itself and for the daily continuance of that life. To call the man "child" emphasizes that this one in need is a child of God, totally dependent on his Creator for life and the renewal of life through forgiveness. Jesus is showing that God wants to bring healing to God's children, and he makes sure his listeners don't miss the point, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive"

The story starts by describing the crowd pressing in on Jesus. There is no room for them in the house. Jesus' first response is to preach "the word to them." He must

have immediately seen the physical needs they had; but the first thing he does is preach the Word to them. There is healing in the proclamation of the Word we celebrate the first part of our eucharist liturgy. It is good to remind lectors, preachers, as well as listeners, of this healing power of the Word. What do we bring to this worship today that needs to be addressed by the divine Parent who created us and wants to heal the damage done to us by the sins we have committed or those committed against us? Jesus' raising of the paralytic comes by the power of his word; in this miracle, he does not touch the man. His word "touches" the man at the place the man has his greatest need for healing. Preachers bring a healing word; it is important that we ourselves have heard the Word and preach from it.

When the man is healed he is sent back home. One can imagine what difference those at home will experience in him—the man forgiven his sins and healed of his paralysis. One imagines that he will speak quite freely and enthusiastically of the man who healed him. When we leave this liturgy today, we "take up our mats and go home." Sometimes home can be the most difficult place to speak of our faith; yet it is the first place we are called to do so, not only by example, but by our words. We pray at our celebration today that we are freed of any paralysis or sin that limits the witness of our faith to our families and those closest to us. We pray that by our actions and words others might come to know the One who set us free.

I wonder if Mark isn't implying still more in this story. The story clearly shows Jesus power over sin and illness. Is it also a metaphor for the new and resurrected life we have in him at our death? Recent funerals of friends and a family member have me seeing today's gospel scene from the perspective of our funeral liturgy. Friends and family bring the deceased back into the faith community from which he/she received new life at baptism. As we have done so often, the community receives the "child" of God. We present the beloved dead to the Lord and, seeing our faith, he exercises his "authority to forgive sins." Even though we are still early in Mark's gospel, the stories we hear these Sundays seem to be saying that it is Jesus' "second nature" to forgive and heal. We can rely on him to do what comes naturally for him. Sin has alienated humans from God and is at the heart of our brokenness and paralysis. Jesus speaks a word, heals the consequences of sin and restores us to God, to our community and to ourselves. The story is promising us this deep healing. We hear these words of Jesus daily in our lives, "Child, your sins are forgiven." And someday, we will hear them one last time when we too will rise and "go home."

We aren't sure of the paralyzed man's faith; the man doesn't speak. But at the least he allowed his friends to take him to Jesus. The story says, "Jesus saw their faith." It is quite possible that this is referring to the faith of the four friends who carried the man, tore up the roof and lowered him in front of Jesus. These friends formed a caring community of faith. They were concerned about their friend and their faith prompted them to act. Other gospel miracles will emphasize the faith of the one healed. But here the faith of the group evokes a response. The four friends are the beginning of an endless list of concerned "friends" who have brought others to Jesus. (The faith of one person enabling healing for another repeats itself in Mark—cf. 5:36; 7: 24-30; 9:24.) How many adult children recall their parents' faith and feel its effects in their lives? They say things like, "My parents' faith gave me courage and helped me get through a very difficult time in my life."

In parishes you hear and see this gospel story a lot—people concerned about others, praying for them and reaching out to help them. Sometimes you notice at worship an adult child bringing an elderly and infirmed parent to church; others bring a handicapped neighbor. But it isn't just physical handicaps that stir a response in believers. An RCIA team works with people searching in faith; catechists take our children apart during the liturgy of the Word; ministry teams visit the sick, give food to the hungry, clothe the poor, console the grieving, etc. These "friends," in one way or another, are bringing those in need to Jesus. He, for his part, affirms the faith of those who believe that he will do what is best for a "child" of God.

How clever the paralyzed man's friends were! They figured out a way to get him to Jesus. We might pray for ingenuity at this eucharist. We know of so many physical and interior needs of those around us. The story tells us that Jesus wants to heal and that human involvement in getting those in need to Jesus is important. The man wouldn't have been healed if his believing friends hadn't gotten involved. We will need ingenuity to know what our role in the healing of others will be: when shall we speak up, or hold our tongues; when to do something, when to wait? But we need wait no longer to include these others in our prayer. We know that Jesus will see our faith and bring healing to those for whom we pray. Let's hope our prayer shows us what our role is in that healing. Where is the mat? Who needs to be carried?

If the preacher has been looking for an occasion to speak on the Sacrament of

Reconciliation, this story may provide the opportunity. Mark says the healing took place while Jesus was in Capernaum, “it became known that he was at home.” (Was it Jesus’ house and his own roof that was dismantled? Good thing he was a carpenter!) Here in the house of Jesus where we have gathered today, sins are forgiven. Jesus and we are “at home” here and healing takes place for us--- as surely as it did for the paralytic. Here too sacramental words of forgiveness are spoken. Jesus says through his community’s intercession, “Your sins are forgiven.” Here, surrounded by our friends, our paralysis is broken and we are restored to health and sent back to our lives renewed.

QUOTABLE

The Risk

You take a risk when you invite the Lord
Whether to dine or talk the afternoon
Away, for always the unexpected soon
Turns up: a woman breaks her precious nard,
A sinner does the task you should assume,
A leper who is cleansed must show his proof:
Suddenly you see your very roof removed
And a cripple clutters up your living room.

There's no telling what to expect when Christ
Walks in your door. The table set for four
Must often be enlarged and decorum
Thrown to the wind. It's His voice that calls them
And it's no use to bolt and bar the door:
His kingdom knows no bounds of roof, or wall, or floor.

----- by Marcella Marie Holloway

JUSTICE NOTES

In light of the statement by U.S. Catholic Bishops (June 15, 2001) on global warming and their call to “exercise stewardship” in our use of natural resources, during these next weeks I will be sharing with you recommendations for how we can help the environment. Some are simple, some will require a long-term commitment. (I found these on the bulletin board of a retreat house; sorry, I do not know the original source.) We preachers need to recall the goodness of creation for our hearers and challenge them, and ourselves, to tend to what God has placed in our hands.

- Explore alternative energy sources (e.g., solar, wind).
- Urge local officials to begin curbside recycling.
- Enjoy recreational activities that use renewable instead of nonrenewable energy (e.g., hike instead of watch television).
- Buy products that will last and rent items you do not use very often.
- Start a community garden.
- Educate children about sustainable-living practices.
- Support work to empower the poor.
- Write letters to the editor expressing your concern about environmental and social justice issues.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- William Q. Jones # 0219316 (On death row since 7/16/91)
 - Renwick Gibbs # 0144649 (11/14/91)
 - Henry Mc Callum # 0265106 (11/22/91)
 - Clinton Rose #0351933 (12/19/91)
- Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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