

BE LONGING

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 2, 2023

Scripture: Mark 2:1-12

I've sung the hymn that gathered us together this morning* on a lot of fourth-of-July Sundays, and I always think of those trumpets as a hymnodist's way of flag waving. It's good, I guess, that we should trumpet our high aspirations bravely and proudly; that's certainly been the default theme of our national birthday party. But even while steeping ourselves in the brassy confidence of that venerable hymn tune, I'm wondering if you might be finding the mood of this particular holiday weekend, as I am, a bit more complicated?

I have a friend who likes to remind me that so often we don't really *choose* our work, we do the work that is put before us. And I think that's especially true of our work as citizens. I can't help feeling that this year it might weigh more heavily to be the citizens that we are with whatever sense of privilege our childhood Fourth's might have instilled in us offset by a looming sense of responsibility. The words of our founding constitutional challenge "to form a more perfect union" cast a noticeable shadow of melancholy these days, with the distance between this time and place and anything more perfect seemingly widening before our very eyes. As freedom gets reduced to platitudes of self-congratulation while the hard, hard work of democracy and justice languishes, the mood of triumph seems to be dissipating and in its place an unrequited *yearning* rises and gathers urgency—yearning for a quality of union, of civic life, of inner peace as we seek (in the words of your summer theme) to rebuild lives and community from the splinters of lost time.

I think God draws especially near to us when we open our hearts and our arms and our imaginations to say, O Lord, what now??? Maybe we need a burst of trumpets to awaken both us and God to the urgency with which, today, we're leaning into the prayer. This is a time for leaning forward: into God's future, toward God's hope for all the good that can come into the world because we're trying to hold fast to the light of mercy, of justice, of beauty. With some help from a splendid book by Susan Cain called "Bittersweet"***, I've come to actually think that our longing, even the sense of urgent sadness that now tinges institutions we have prized so highly for so long, is one of God's gifts for us in this time and place.

Let's begin thinking about that longing by punching a hole in the ceiling.

When Jesus 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 to Jesus bringing a person who was paralyzed, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring the person to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Jesus, and after having dug through it they lowered the mat with the paralyzed person lying on it.

* "God of the Ages, Whose Almighty Hand" with Daniel Crane Roberts' 1876 text slightly updated in "Glory to God" (the 2013 Presbyterian hymnal) sung to the tune "National Hymn" with its stirring trumpet fanfare at the opening of each verse.

**** Susan Cain, "Bitter-Sweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole" (New York, Crown/Random House, 2022).

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the person who was paralyzed, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, and they questioned in their hearts "Why does this fellow speak in this way? This 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 Jesus 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 paralyzed one, "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And immediately the one who had been paralyzed stood up, 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."

Actually, before the story is through a lot more barriers will get pushed through than just the ceiling of that house in Capernaum: also a crowd that didn't even realize they were in the way and also a whole lot of assumptions get pushed through as we'll see when we notice what's going on with the scribes who were also there. Before it's through even the complicated boundary between sin and suffering gets pushed through.

The first thing it's interesting to notice about this story is that the person at the center of all that pushing is someone who, as the story begins, actually can't even move. The problem, at least externally, is paralysis: an illness of some kind that has caused this person to be completely dependent on other people for mobility. There's an internal problem, too: we can't see it at first but Jesus can. Jesus is going deep. He knows about the paralytic because he knows about all of us that there are things we carry inside that keep us from moving, that pin us to the past, things that crave forgiveness. Most of us know something about the longing to move on, the yearning for freedom from stuck-ness. So Jesus goes deep; he starts by speaking directly to the inner knot that this paralyzed person is carrying. You're forgiven he says, which, as far as the watching scribes are concerned, is audacious to the point of blasphemy. It punches a hole in the rules they play by, especially their assumption that if some itinerant rabbi (or anyone else) goes around offering the restoring love of God to just anybody, it'll run out, or stop meaning anything or (worse, from their point of view) it'll raise the dignity of some of the people that they'd like to continue to look down on. With their fingers in the pages of the rulebook that they think places limits on access to God's restorative forgiveness, they're scandalized: "How dare this fellow presume to proclaim God's forgiveness?" Interestingly the story says that they question *in their hearts*; they don't sputter their outrage out loud but they don't have to because Jesus is going deep. Jesus knows hearts and knows the kinds of things that get muttered in certain kinds of very small hearts. So Jesus says (more or less): The thing about God is that God wants people to be able to move on. Let's see how much God wants this one to be free. Then Jesus turns to the paralytic and says (more or less): Why don't you show us what freedom means to you?

There's no explaining what happens then. All we know is that a few minutes later the one who had been unable to move is walking *out* of a world that used to be only as narrow as a sickbed and *into* a world that's as wide as the word home and Jesus has taken the low ceiling of the scribes' pinched view of God clean off.

The boundary between the states of health of our bodies and our inner lives is a complicated one. We always need to remember that physical infirmity is not a symptom of moral failing. The illnesses that burden some people in this world are not a form of punishment for their sins because illness is not a moral state. For most of us, the relationship to our body is probably very much influenced by our relationship to our inner life and when one is restored or unburdened the other can often move more lightly. We are permeable to wellbeing in all our dimensions. In fact, I'd venture to say that wellbeing is actually a very contagious aspect of

our existence individually and collectively; aren't we so often drawn to be with people who just seem *well*? One of God's best things is requiting our yearning for wellbeing. God desires our wholeness and so Jesus has things to say to each dimension of our longing that can help restore each and all of our dimensions.

Paul the apostle, in a moment of tremendous spiritual candor and vulnerability, wrote that "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Those venerable words remind me that the way to belonging, in the family of God, is to *be longing*: to be leaning toward the good that we desire, toward the vindication of the values of love and justice that matter most to us. It's our *longing* that gives this journey meaning; it's the laboring pains of yearning that get us leaning toward the birth of the new time, the wholeness, that God intends for us.

With that kind of longing in mind, let's go back to that full house in Capernaum because we need to not miss one particular thing about that story without which there would have been no miracle that evening. It's not just the story of one person's healing. It's also the story of those four people who started the breaking of the barriers by dismantling the roof and with it any sense of ceiling on the power of God to get us moving.

The story doesn't tell us how many times the four of them walked around the house looking for a way to get their friend in, how many shoulders they tapped on, to no avail, how much they tried to nudge through all those people who probably had no idea that their focus on Jesus was keeping anyone else out. Nor does Mark tell us how long it took the four of them to get their immobile friend up to the roof. And we don't know how much faith, if any, their paralyzed friend had, maybe it was one of those situations where they said to their friend: It doesn't matter how much you believe, we'll believe for you until you can believe yourself. But the text pointedly says that it was when Jesus saw their faithfulness that he said to the paralyzed one, you're free, you're moving, you're forgiven, as though to say with people like that around we have something new ready to begin in this time and place. With fidelity like that we have movement; the rebuilding of lives and communities has begun. With faith like that there is a church, there is a future. With caring like that there can be freedom. With friends like that there will be change. People like that move the world.

The late New Testament theologian Walter Wink wrote, "History belongs to the intercessors; they believe the future into being." The story of this nation was supposed to be about our setting *each other* free. The story of this body that we are is the story being written by the intercessors: the ones who pour out their prayers, the ones who push the barriers, the ones who remove the ceiling between us and the generosity, the power, the healing and the forgiveness of God. It's their leaning, their yearning, their longing, that ends up enabling us all to belong. They believe the future into being.

And, of course, you're surrounded now in this very room, in this time and place, by those very people: the intercessors. They're leaning, with you, toward the more perfect union, longing, with you, for the time when the fanfare can finally announce the vindication of this long, costly struggle. Our longing will take us places that God wants us to go including through the structures that need to be moved out of the way of restoration. Jesus is going deep and we need to go deep with him, even into the valley of the shadow of longing because to belong to this movement is to *be* longing, actively, urgently.