

March 8, 2020

Mark 2: 1-12

Romans 7: 15-25a

Unstuck

The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding

It occurs to me that one way of understanding what the season of Lent is about is to think about putting one's house in order. In the early centuries of the church, when the custom was to celebrate the sacrament of baptism only during the pre-dawn darkness before Easter morning, the six weeks leading up to it were given shape and meaning by spiritual instruction and preparation for nothing less than a hinge-moment of life. Though in more recent generations we've made baptism a more moveable feast, and the focus of Lent has shifted a bit away from renunciation and toward fresh spiritual practices, the Christian family still finds it useful to think of the forty days leading up to Easter as a season of reassessment, realignment, re-orientation, renewal.

Of course, we still tend to think of all that "re-" work as an essentially personal project. When the spiritual disciplines of Lent are helpful in getting the house of someone's heart and the house of someone's conscience in order, that's never a bad thing – even though it can also sometimes feed the hyper-individualization that's so rampant in our society, as though nothing mattered more than how things are, spiritually, for *me*.

But it seemed to us, on the worship staff, that the weeks leading up to this particular Easter in the life of this particular community might be a ripe time to think about the house that we might be hoping to put in order together – the house that we *are*, together. As we began to ponder how, in this transitional year of all years, Lent could be about *communal* renewal, about re-orientation for the future that God has in mind for us together in this church, it occurred to us to ask a question that's really about the meaning of this house: *why are we here?* Maybe it seems strange to think of a house as something that *has* meaning; but if we think about putting this house that we are in order as we make our way to a turning point, it's perhaps not such a stretch to think of Lent asking us some pressing questions of meaning: What does this house stand for? Why does it matter? What difference does it make? Why are we here?

In some ways, this Lent started back in November when our elders and deacons went on retreat together and did an exercise that felt like starting to put the house in order. The reflections we collected that weekend work well as a way of thinking about why we're here, and what the meaning of this house might be – and we'll be carrying them along through Lent. In last Sunday's sermon, Jay Sanderford focused on a first insight from the retreat:

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that we're here, partly, because we know something, together, about brokenness – and because we long for wholeness. Today I'm thinking about how we know something, together, about being stuck – and because we long for movement, for change, for a return to vitality.

Well – if the goal is to put the communal house in order, it's an odd thing to start by punching a hole in the roof. That's how chapter 2 of the gospel of Mark begins – but the story is actually on its way through a number of barriers to a hinge moment, and before it's through it will have pushed, not only through the ceiling of that house in Capernaum, but also through the crowd that didn't even realize they were in anyone's way, and through the assumptions of the scribes who felt it was their job to be in *everyone's* way where forgiveness is concerned, and even through the complicated boundary between sin and suffering.

It's interesting that the person who starts the breaking of all these barriers is someone who, as the story begins, is actually pinned motionless by life circumstances. With the rest of the crowd, we can see the external problem: it's paralysis that causes abject dependence on others for mobility. We can't see the internal problem – but Jesus can. Jesus knows, about the paralytic – because Jesus knows about all of us – that there are things we carry inside that pin us to the past, things that crave forgiveness. Most of us know something about the experience of being stuck – and something about the longing for forward movement, the hope for change. So Jesus goes deep: he speaks directly to the inner knot that this paralyzed person is carrying: “Your sins are forgiven,” he says. That's the first thing.

And what an audacious thing it is. It breaks through a barrier for some who are watching in that packed room: the scribes, who are sure that the rules say that the restoring love of God is a finite thing, so that if some itinerant rabbi (or anyone else) goes around giving it away to just anybody, it'll run out, or stop meaning anything – or, perhaps most dangerously, it'll raise the dignity of people that some would like to continue to look down on. The text says that those scribes – the ones with their fingers in the pages of the rulebook that they think places limits on access to God's restorative forgiveness – are scandalized: “How dare this fellow presume to proclaim God's forgiveness?!” They're convinced, of course, that they know who deserves it and who doesn't. The text says that they question *in their hearts*, not that they 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 small ones. So Jesus says (more or less): *the thing about God is that God wants people unstuck. Let's see how much God wants this one to be unstuck.* Then he turns to the paralytic and says (more or less): *Let's see how unstuck you are!* There's no explaining what happens then – but as the one who had been paralyzed walks home, carrying his own pallet, to put his own house in order at last, Jesus' wide view of God's generosity has certainly won out over the scribes' narrow view of God's selectivity.

Now, at this particular hinge-moment in history, when we're so particularly aware of illness and its implications for communities, there are a couple of things it's really important to notice about this story of healing. One is that, in the case of the person who was lowered down to Jesus through a hole in the roof, there are two dimensions of being at stake: the spiritual and the physical. They are distinct, and Jesus addresses them separately, first one – *your sins are forgiven* – and then the other – *take up your pallet and walk*. Illness is not a moral state.

That said: for most of us, our relationship to our body is probably very much influenced by our relationship to our conscience – and when one is restored or unburdened, the other can often move more lightly. We are permeable to wellbeing; in fact, I'd venture to say that wellbeing is actually a very contagious aspect of our existence, individually and collectively. And one of the most unmistakable messages of this story is that God desires our wellbeing – which is to say, our wholeness – and that Jesus has things to say to each dimension of our state of wellbeing that can help to get us unstuck.

This is the right moment to listen in on the words Paul wrote to the young church in Rome, as they struggled to get their spiritual house in order. We should remember that Paul wrote this letter back near the beginning of our life together in the house of Christianity – to a church that was, quite possibly, younger than this congregation – and when Paul himself was a newer Christian than some of you. Listen to how much he knows about being stuck - in the seventh chapter of that letter (reading from Eugene Peterson's masterful paraphrase, called "The Message") –

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.

Being pinned to pieces of the past is part of what Paul carried with him. His honesty about that experience of being stuck must have been breathtaking to the young Christians in Rome. And somehow, finally, the freedom he found in Christ filled him with so much confidence and joy that he rode it to every corner of the known world of his time – and sent them all letters to encourage them in his absence as they worked to put their houses in order.

Those letters landed then, and land still, in the midst of communities in the process of re-orienting themselves to the breadth of God's restorative power. So letters to communities – yes, other people's mail – are the medium, par excellence, by which we can find encouragement for the work we need to do together: to understand what this house stands for – and why it matters – and what difference it makes.

And as we do that work now, in this particular season in this particular church, we need to not miss the thing without which there would have been no miracle that night in that full house in Capernaum. 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 unstuck.

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 piety was keeping anyone else out – or how long it took them to get their immobile friend up to the roof. 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 says that it was when Jesus saw their faith [and the Greek word actually connotes not just trust but *fidelity*] that he said to the paralyzed one, "Your sins are forgiven." As though to say: with people like that around, we have something beginning here. With fidelity like that, we have a church. With faith like that – we're coming unstuck. With friends like that – there will be movement; 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 the church, on its way to its hinge moments – the story of the world, on the way to its turning point – 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. They believe the future into being.

And they're sitting all around you right now, in this room. The intercessors. The ones whose faith may not be perfect, but is enough, at least, to convince Jesus that there's movement going on here. That we, even we, after all we've been through, can be unstuck.

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