

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: First Things First”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Mark 2:1-9

Leviticus 4:27-31

My wife Cindy will tell you that there are times in my life when I just lose it...and some of those actually happen when I am not in a car. One of my more recent episodes was during the presidential debates when each candidate was asked a simple question, a question that could have been answered yes or no, or with a one sentence response. Yet neither of them answered the question. Instead they chose to talk about something completely different. Maybe it was an attack on their opponent. Maybe it was a favorite topic of theirs. It didn't matter what it was, the response had nothing to do with the question as if they neither heard, nor cared about what was asked; what was desired. It was in those moments when I would stand up and start yelling at the television (as if they could hear me in the debate hall), “Just answer the question!!!” And I have to say that in some ways I probably would have been yelling at Jesus as well if I had been present in that room where this morning's story had taken place. Let me explain.

Jesus is busy teaching and healing. His reputation has preceded him and so the crowds are growing. In this case the house in which he was holding his town hall was a bit small and access was limited. Outside there were men who had brought their friend to Jesus in order to be healed. They were so desperate to have their friend healed that they were willing to do some damage to the house in order to get their friend in front of Jesus. We know that they believed that Jesus could heal him because Mark tells us that Jesus saw their faith. And let me be clear at this point, the faith Jesus saw was not in him as messiah, or Son of God, it was faith that he could heal their friend. So there before Jesus is this paralyzed man. A man who could not support himself or his family. A man who was desperate to be made whole. A man who was willing to have his friends lower him through a roof. And he wanted, they wanted, one thing...to be healed. So what does Jesus do? He forgives him. This is when I want to start yelling. “Jesus! Can't you just give them what they want!”

As we read this story it is in some ways unclear as to why Jesus does this. A cursory look might make us assume that Jesus does this in order to tick off the religious lawyers who were present. Evidently they had some sort of long running disagreement about forgiveness. The religious lawyers believed that forgiveness could only be obtained through the processes we read about in Leviticus. You bring an animal, or some cereal, or whatever the Torah requires, to the Temple, give it to the priests and Levites, they do their thing and then one is forgiven. Not that they believed that there was magic in the offering, but it was the process that mattered and only after the process would God forgive. No single individual, Jesus or otherwise, had the right to circumvent the process and do what God can do. Jesus, on the other hand, believed that he had been given the ability to forgive. So here on the campaign trail we had Jesus taking what was a simple request, and turning it into a moment in which he could make his point about his identity. So again, “Jesus, Can't you just give them what they want!!!” What I would offer was that Jesus planned all along to heal the man, but first things first.

In order to understand this, we need to return to our story from two weeks ago...which I realize in church time is a very long time ago...in which Jesus told the story of the rich man going to hell and the poor man going to heaven. That story turned the world of his listeners upside down because everyone knew that to be rich meant you were living a holy life and to be poor meant that you were a sinner. Fast forward to our story and apply that understanding. To all who were in that house, the paralyzed man was not simply the recipient of bad luck, of an accident. They would have believed that he was cursed by God. That his condition had been caused by sin. Chances are that the man felt the same way. He would have been wondering what he had done wrong that would have left him in this condition. And even though sin had nothing to do with his paralysis, deep inside he would never have been free of his doubt...and neither would have been the community. If Jesus had simply healed him, both the man and the community would have always seen him as a lucky sinner, and nothing more. So when Jesus forgives the man, he resets the entire scene. This man is forgiven, made whole. He is no longer viewed as a sinner, as cursed by God, but he is viewed as one who has been brought from curse to blessing, from exile to the community of God's people. First things first. Then and only then does Jesus physically heal him. And again, please remember, that Jesus does not connect sin with healing. One is spiritual. The other is physical.

First things first. One of the great truths of our faith is that God desires that each of us be whole and complete; that we be fully connected to God and neighbor. What happens when we sin is that the connection between ourselves and God, between ourselves and others is broken. The gift we are given however, is that we are offered forgiveness. We are offered grace and mercy. In and through Jesus Christ we are given the opportunity to reset the entire scene of our lives. This is the reason that each Sunday we have a prayer of confession and an assurance of pardon. The first is the opportunity to confess, to lay before God those things that break our relationships, the second is to be reminded that we are forgiven, so that we can move toward wholeness. First things first. Yet, many of us, never fully accept the forgiveness that is offered. We hold on to ancient sins, to wrongs that we have done, to rights we should have done, to things that we have said and cannot take back, to moments of reconciliation that we let slip away...and the list is virtually endless. What happens when we do this is that we remain less than whole. We become spiritually paralyzed such that we cannot live into the fullness of the life that we are offered. We cannot fully receive the love that is poured out for us.

What to do? This morning I want to offer you a spiritual practice that I hope will help you find forgiveness; that will help you reset the scene of your life. If you are willing here is what I would like you to do. First close your eyes and cup your hands together as if someone is going to place something in them. Then imagine in your cupped hands the thing for which you have trouble finding forgiveness. Feel the weight of it. Feel it dragging your hands downward. Now, as you feel the weight of it, sense a light beginning to surround you. A light that brings a warmth of love washing over you. Hear the words of Jesus, "You are forgiven. I will take your weight. You are forgiven I will take your weight. You are forgiven, I will take your weight." Then feel the weight lifting. Feel your hands light as if nothing is in them. Spread them apart because nothing is there. It is gone. Forgiveness has come and you are free. Take a very deep breath, then slowly exhale. Feel your forgiveness.

You and I are given the gift of forgiveness. We are given this gift so that we might find life in all of its amazing fullness and wonder. So the challenge that I want to offer is this, to ask, "How am I allowing the forgiveness God offers to reset the scene of my life?"