

Seeing Greater Things: The Paralytic

Mark 2:1-12 (NIV)

¹ A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? ¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, ¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Last week, we heard Jesus tell Nathanael that he would see greater things than him seeing Nathanael under the fig tree before seeing him with his eyes. For today and the next couple of weeks, we get to see some of those greater things.

Already in Jesus' first year of public ministry, we see how popular he had become. "[The people] gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and [Jesus] preached the word to them." (verse 2) One of the people wanting to hear Jesus was a paralytic, a man who couldn't walk. Four of his friends carried this man to the house where Jesus was preaching, but they couldn't get through the crowd. So, they did something maybe a bit extreme. "They made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" (verses 4b-5)

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (verses 6-7) These teachers of the law were the Bible scholars of Jesus' day. They're watching this scene unfold seemingly unfazed by the man being lowered through the roof but focusing on Jesus thinking to themselves, "Who does this guy think he is that he can forgive sins? That's something only God can do. By claiming to do this, he's blaspheming, demeaning God, posing as someone who can wield the authority of God when he is only a man."

"Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts." (verse 8a) Here is one of those greater things. Just as Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree before seeing him in person, so also Jesus knew what the teachers of the law were thinking in their hearts without facial expressions or mutterings. He, as the all-knowing God made flesh, read their hearts!

Knowing their hearts, Jesus calls them out and challenges them. "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?" (verses 8b-9) I suppose the energy it takes to say either phrase is the same, but making either one happen is a different story. In fact, we could probably say that it's easier to say to the man to "Get up, take your mat, and walk," because medical advancements have come so far in the field of prosthetics and technology that people are getting bionic legs and those who were paralyzed can now walk. What a few years ago we would have classified as science fiction is now science fact. But what about forgiving someone's sins?

There have been many attempts to cure sin. Some ignore it, pretend as if it's not a thing, that it's a hoax, and you shouldn't feel bad about anything that you do. "To err is human," right? Others downgrade sin to be only the really bad stuff that we knowingly (and not ignorantly) choose to do. These are the things that they make laws against like murder, theft, rape, pedophilia, etc., instead of things like telling "white" lies, hatred that you keep unspoken to yourself, worry, ignoring the needs of others. But this doesn't cure sin. It's just trying to redefine it and escape the reality of it.

In spite of our piles of self-help books, counselors galore, and supposed intellectual enlightenment and advancement, it often feels as though the world is getting worse. Already in 2021 we have seen the nature of people as violence broke out at our nation's capital, causing destruction on a scale that we've not seen there since the War of 1812 when the British set the building on fire. Seeing the events that day and hearing politicians say that they believe in the American people, I couldn't help but ask, "Are we really a people worth believing in? Can we really say that people are basically good and not prone to sin, to acts of destruction?"

I look at myself. I've seen and know the beautiful truth that my sinful nature has been drowned in the waters of baptism, but I still don't abandon sin. I still find myself committing sins over and over again. Call it what you want. Try to ignore it. Put all sorts of time and effort into improving myself so as to stop sinning, and yet I can't get rid of the sin in my life and it doesn't just go away. I cannot forgive my sins and take them away.

Many people in Jesus' day believed that illness, and, in this case, paralysis, was a result of a personal sin. No doubt this weighed heavily on the man's heart, but he had heard of a cure to sin. This is why his friends ripped through the roof to get their friend in front of Jesus. And Jesus showed them something greater as he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (verse 5b) All the sins that had stained the life of this paralytic – everything from day to day worry to any heinous or horrendous deeds he had done which weighed down his guilty conscience – they were all taken away, gone forever, paid for by the man announcing this forgiveness. The acceptance before God was further solidified as he called this paralytic, "Son." This simple title meant that he was reconciled to God, made right with him, had good standing with God. His sins were forgiven! Could we ever see something greater than that!

Jesus' cure for sins to this paralyzed man are ours as well. We heard God speaking those words to us this morning in our confession and absolution. We confessed that our sins were indeed paid for with the words of the Nicene Creed. As you came in, you saw the baptismal font and were reminded that your sins have been washed away. In moments, Jesus' body and blood will be offered - given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins. You are God's child! Your sins are forgiven! Heaven is open to you! These are the greater things that you get to see happen!

The paralyzed man's sins were truly taken away when Jesus announced it, but there wasn't a visual to go along with it, something to see that it happened. The crowd of people that day nor us literally see the dark sin stains of death peel off of a person and float away attaching themselves to the cross when God declares them forgiven – even though that's what happens. Thus Jesus does another one of those greater things. He says, "But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. (verses 10-12a) They may not have seen the sins leaving this man, but seeing this man get up and walk proved that they had seen this man's sins forgiven as only God can do. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (verse 12b)

Now, I've always assumed that they were talking about the paralyzed man now walking. But is that the amazing thing they saw? It was a presupposition of mine that the paralyzed man and his friends dug through the roof of the house to get his legs working again, that this was their primary reason for them being there. But was that really their motivation? When they make it through the roof and lower this man right in front of Jesus, Jesus doesn't first heal his legs. He first healed his soul. "Son, your sins are forgiven." (verse 5b) If they were there for his legs, wouldn't they have voiced an objection? Wouldn't they have said, "Um, hey, Jesus, forgiveness is nice and all, but we heard you can do healings. Can you fix his legs now?" But they don't. The paralyzed man was cured of his sin and was basking in it before Jesus did another of those greater things.

Do you feel that if we don't get to see a paralyzed person walk or a person with stage 4 lung cancer instantly cured or a total health reversal for someone who is on their death bed that we are missing out on seeing the greater things that Jesus promised? How do we feel seeing the forgiveness of sins here today? Has this greater thing become common to you, unremarkable, seen it, yawn, what's next? Do we show the same zeal and passion that caused these men to tear through a roof to get to Jesus in order to hear the forgiveness of sins? If you had to purchase Jesus' vaccination from sin, would you camp out overnight, trying to be the first in line, crash the website to make sure you were going to get it? How far would you travel for it? Has this greater thing of the forgiveness of sins lost its amazingness for us?

God, forgive us when we have overlooked and undervalued you as the one who heals and cures us from our sins. You so graciously show us this greater thing of the forgiveness of sins, week in and week out. May we always be amazed by it and seek it and surround ourselves with it with the same passion as these men who ripped through a roof to get to you and the forgiveness you offer. Help us, Lord, to never cease being amazed at seeing this greater thing that we have, that our sins are forgiven. Amen.