Tear off the Roof

February 19, 2006 (7th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B)

Isaiah 43:18-25 Psalm 32 or 32:1-8 2 Corinthians 1:18-22 Mark 2:1-12

Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat on which the paralyzed man lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

When Jesus saw *their* faith…*their* faith.

There was no way in to the rabbi when he had come back to Capernaum, back to Simon's house (the home where he healed Simon's mother-in-law: the story we read from Mark three weeks ago). The whole town was abuzz; wealthy and poor, scholars and day-laborers, packed in and around this house.

They hemmed in God's Word, keeping him on the other side of a narrow door,
like a statue in a Roman temple. Temples had a large courtyard where ordinary folks could gather and hear the sounds and take in the smells of worship and sacrifice. There were steep, inhumanly steep steps, and perhaps an inner courtyard for priests and scholars and kings. And then often there was a *sanctum sanctorum*, the holy of holies, where only a ritually cleansed priest could enter, within which the god resided.

Jesus, trapped inside Simon's house, was beginning to be treated the same way. *So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door*...Until this group of friends climbed up on to the flat roof of the house, going up the stairs on the side of the house, and then tore the roof off, dug through the wattle and daub, the reeds and mud, tearing open a whole in the roof so their friend could get near the teacher.

No religious scholars, no temple or crowd, was going to get in their way. They moved past people who could not see the man, only the mat he lay on; people who saw the paralysis but not the person who was paralyzed; people who saw only the disease.

Have you ever had trouble getting in to church? I have. I stopped going to church for a good five, almost six, years. I know I'm not alone.

For some folks, they can't come in to the church because the crowd is blocking the door. A few months ago, I told you the story of a Latino friend of mine, who, on showing up to an Episcopal church in Fall River, was told by the white greeter, "Are you sure you're in the right church?" Race, language, sexuality, culture – all can be used to keep the church door narrow and unapproachable.

For some folks, they can't come in to the church because the crowd is blocking the door. The Christians they hear about seem rabid and strange, preaching against evolution, concerned about personal salvation, but seemingly ignorant of the sermon on the mount; or they seem cold and distant, seemingly ignorant of the transcendent power of the living God, blazing through the sacraments, the prayers, the gathering.

For some folks, they can't come in to the church because the crowd is blocking the door.

But for some folks, they can't come in to the church because they are paralyzed. That's why I didn't come to church, that's why I didn't come to God, in my late teens and early twenties. I was emotionally, spiritually paralyzed with grief, paralyzed with anger, paralyzed with fear.

In my case, it was the death of my father when he was 57, when I was 18. The death of a parent or friend, the diagnosis of a terminal or chronic illness, wounded-ness from physical or spiritual abuse, silence when we most needed to hear the voice of Love, depression that pulls us into the Slough of Despond…

We wouldn't come to church, or, more importantly, come to God, because we were paralyzed in our brokenness

Mark's story – it isn't a story about physical healing; the physical healing is an afterthought, a rhetorical flourish meant to prove that there was *no* connection between illness and sin. A shocking concept in a culture which often believed that terrible illness was caused by terrible sin; to be paralyzed was to be a sinner! But here in Mark's story, the physical transformation was independent of the spiritual transformation. While still paralyzed, he had already been set free by Jesus, set back in relationship with God.

Mark's story is a story about reconciling a human being with God. *"Son, your sins are forgiven."* It is a story about how that reconciliation can still happen, even if, even when, we are still, *still*, paralyzed.

When Jesus saw their faith, when Jesus saw their faith, *he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*

When we are paralyzed with grief or fear or anger or sorrow or sin or loss, when we are paralyzed, our friends can still bring us before God. Our paralysis might be long, or it might be momentary, but it prevents us from approaching God. Yet our friends can approach God on our behalf.

We bring into this place, into this house, prayers for many people, people we know and love, people we know only by name, or through news reports, or through a friend of a friend. We bring in patients and parents and children and friends whom we care for. We bring in names and images and questions. We bring in our hearts the folks who can't or won't come in the door, and in our prayers we lower them down through the roof.

Not simply in to a building – Jesus, after all, seemed to spend half his time getting away from houses and buildings and temples. In prayer, we are nurturing community, *communion*.

It is why I am so impressed with friends who say they are spiritual but not religious, not in to organized religion. Maybe they can do something I find so difficult – praying all the time, always open to God. Because some days I find it *hard* to pray. But I am part of a community part of a communion. I know that my community is with me. If I can't come in through the door, I know they'll bring me in through the roof.

It is a great gift to receive and to give, to carry each other's sorrows, to love a friend when they cannot love themselves, to pray for them when they have no words. To show each other that there is no crowd, no narrow door, no brokenness or loneliness or sorrow, neither height nor depth, nor any thing, which can separate us from the love of God.

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