

Isaiah 43:18-19, 25

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

Mark 2:1-12

When he 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, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It 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 he 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 paralytic-- "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately 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!"

### **“Indiscriminate Forgiveness”**

Last Friday I took a trip with two friends to the Women’s Rights National Historic Park in Seneca Falls. Laurel and Ellen are also young Presbyterian ministers. Laurel drove over from Wyoming to Avon and met up with me, then I drove the two of us over to Geneva where Ellen lives. On the drive east on 5 & 20 Laurel and I chatted away until she exclaimed, “Do you see that?” “No” I said. Glancing sideways to see what I thought would be another downed tree from all the wind we had that night and morning, all I saw was the front of a small country church. “That little white church” said Laurel, “had a sign that said, “World Peace Begins Here. All Are Welcome. Come Join Us!” We both fell into a silent reverie. What a sign! Its confidence in its context shook me. “Who were they?” I asked (meaning what denomination). “I don’t know” Laurel replied. We were quiet again. The sign’s truth had stunned us. World peace does begin in our own hearts and actions. A small church can be the bearer of God’s radical good news of peace.

We met up with Ellen in Geneva for a wonderful afternoon together. After a delicious lunch and a short drive to Seneca Falls, we ended up with the museum and park to ourselves. It was a bit sad that we were the only visitors, but being able to talk freely amongst ourselves as we delved into women’s rights history was wonderful! We signed up for a “tour” of what remains of the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel. It was the location of the first Women’s Rights Convention in 1848. Lined up in a row, peering through the large window where you can view the chapel from the warmth of the museum, we listened to our guide recount the events that led up to the Convention. The ranger explained in a shy placid voice that what astonished her was that the church’s belief in the first amendment and their hospitality towards any who desired a place to meet

combined with the abolitionist preaching of the minister, had created the environment for the Women's Rights Movement. These beliefs held as truths, freedom of speech, hospitality, and abolishing slavery fostered an environment where women were finally free to proclaim that they should have a full and equal voice in home, church and government matters. The ranger went on, but my mind was fixed on the great faith of the congregation to read and hear the scriptures with new eyes and ears. They heard the Spirit call out to them to do a new thing and God's word led them to challenge oppression. The little white church's proclamation that world peace began with them seemed a fitting modern witness to the happenings generations earlier at Seneca Falls. They must feel God is ready to do a new thing through them.

Both churches showed forth a boldness and confidence in the truth revealed to them. The group that arrived with the paralytic in our text from Matthew also had a conviction that a new thing could be done for the paralyzed man. They had Chutzpah! Their belief led to action. Maybe they glimpsed that in Jesus, God was about to do what the scriptures claimed in Isaiah. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...I am God who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." It's like they knew they were part of the way of God for the paralyzed man. You'd have to believe it was going to be worth it and have confidence and determination to dig a hole in a roof with a full crowd and homeowners below.

We aren't told much about the four except that they were so persistent in getting the paralyzed man in that house that they climbed up and dug a hole through that flat roof with crossbeams covered with thatch and hardened mud. What sights and sounds the people below must have heard!

But those who were gathered hadn't seen anything yet. Jesus took note of the faith of the four men. Jesus, made a way where there was none, responding to the actions of the four with words that startled everyone. When he saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven."

Wait a minute! We usually want to wrap forgiveness in a neat tidy package. Repent, believe, and be forgiven. This we know is promised in the scriptures. Yet our passage begs the question that pushes us out to a deeper faith. How does the paralyzed man feel about his sins being forgiven? Mark isn't interested in telling us what the man's sins were if he had any. We aren't even told if he believed in God, much less Jesus. All we know is that he complied with Jesus' command and witnessed to Jesus' authority as he got up, took his mat and strolled right out of the crowded room.

Biblical scholars say the paralytic's physical healing was a sign that the man had been forgiven. Some say it points to how mind and body are bound together in healing. Mark writes that Jesus' actions spurned questions over his authority. The scribes rightly wondered who Jesus was to presume God's role in forgiveness. Mark intends for the controversies about Jesus' authority to lead us to the assurance that Jesus is our Redeemer. The questions over Jesus' authority that will come out again and again in Mark are meant to guide us to deeper faith in God's work through Jesus.

Part of Jesus' work included healing and forgiving people who do not demonstrate much faith. But when it comes right down to it, do any of us deserve forgiveness and healing any more than the paralytic did? Both the Old and New Testaments are full of stories of people who are healed or forgiven by God, and who

never repented. God sure is an indiscriminating God; lavishly forgiving people simply because that is who God is! God doesn't play by our rules and sometimes even dares to break our standards and forgive for God's own sake as our Old Testament lesson stated! Although the scriptures promise that God will forgive the sins of the repentant, God also lavishes grace upon others as God chooses. Until we accept that we too are receivers of lavish forgiveness, we are not really free to live life to its fullest and serve God with our whole hearts.

What do we know about the paralytic? Only that he chose to get up in response to Jesus words. What if instead of making a move, lifting a finger, he was embarrassed by the actions of the group that brought him there or consigned to the belief that he was paralyzed for life? All we know about the man is that when forgiveness and healing were offered to him, he didn't reject it. He tried it out and went on his way. With the boldness of the four who lowered him down into the home, he accepted Jesus' words and they transformed his life.

Like the paralytic we can respond to grace and claim God's forgiveness and healing in our lives. "...the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin...stand up, take your mat and go to your home." We have the opportunity every day to personally claim God's love for us. Then, with the boldness of the forgiven and healed, we can claim God's healing intent for all and share the message of God's indiscriminate forgiveness as we work for God's justice and peace to come here and now. This surely must be what led the little country church to proclaim "World peace begins here" and the men and women of the Women's Rights Movement to believe in 1848 that God created all men and women with equal love! Amen.