

“BREAKING THROUGH”

MARK 2:1-5

*A sermon preached by Cynthia Bolbach,
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at the installation of the Rev. Fred Lyon as Senior Pastor of Flossmoor Community Church on January 9, 2011*

In my office at BNA, where I work when I’m not off on church business, I have a post-card-sized photo, nicely framed.

When you first look at the photo, you think it’s one of those inspirational photos – you see this grouping of hands all clasped together, like a basketball team just before they’re about to break the huddle. And of course the hands are in all different colors – black, brown, white. So you think, “isn’t this special – an inspirational moment celebrating people coming together in all their rich diversity.”

The photo has a two-line caption. The first line, in large, bold letters, says simply, “Meetings.”

Under that is a second line, in much smaller letters. That line reads, “None of us is as dumb as all of us.”

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It’s a line that resonates with almost anyone who’s attended any meeting anywhere, although whether it describes meetings here at Flossmoor, only you know – and, don’t worry, you don’t have to tell me. You probably should tell Fred, however.

The possibility that gathering people together in groups might lead to difficult behavior is, astonishingly enough, not confined to the present day. Paul himself had to deal with the reality that, sometimes, “none of us is as dumb as all of us.”

Look at Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. Paul founded that church, he put 18 months into establishing a Christian community there. Imagine the emotional investment that he has in making sure that the community continues to thrive and to grow.

And so, when we read parts of his letter to the church there, his frustration, his pain, fairly leap off the pages at us. “It has been brought to my attention,” he writes, “that there are quarrels among you.” Not only are there quarrels, but, Paul tells them, “your meetings tend to do more harm than good.”

It’s almost as if Paul himself wrote that caption – “none of us is as dumb as all of us.”

Except...

Except that Paul knows, better than any of us, that no one – not the folks living in Corinth in the first century, or those of us living in the 21st century – none of us can follow Jesus in isolation.

It's enticing, sometimes, to fantasize about being Christian on your own. To be a Christian without the messiness of interacting with all sorts of people, people who you don't agree with, people who you surely wouldn't invite to your next party. I'm sure that you, like me, have heard someone say, "oh yes, I'm Christian, I'm VERY spiritual, I worship in my garden on Sunday." Or "I worship while walking on the beach."

I'm not saying that someone can't have a spiritual experience while in the garden or while walking on the beach. What I am saying, though, is that none of us can be Christians alone. As much as we'd like to avoid the squabbling, the disagreements that come about whenever people gather together, we can't. We need to come together if we want to be Christians.

And as proof I offer the Gospel lesson. A paralyzed man wants to see Jesus, wants to hear him preach. But because of the large crowd that had gathered at the house where Jesus was, the paralyzed man can't get through the crowd. Left to his own devices, he would not, could not, see Jesus.

But he is not left to his own devices; others are there to help him. They lift him up onto the roof of the house, cut a hole in the roof, and then lower him down. By their action, the paralyzed man sees Jesus.

The paralyzed man could not have seen Jesus on his own. And, let's be honest, neither can we.

Every one of us is paralyzed in some way. Maybe we're paralyzed by fear that faith in Jesus Christ will cause us to be ridiculed or not taken seriously in a post-modern age. Maybe we're paralyzed by the sobering reality of what humans have done to other humans ostensibly in the name of following Jesus. Maybe we're paralyzed by the untimely death of someone we loved, wondering how a God of love could allow something like that to happen. Maybe we're paralyzed by our intellectual rejection of messages broadcast by so many televangelists boasting that if we only knew Jesus, we would be happy, secure, and rich.

Whatever the cause, each of us, at some point, becomes as paralyzed as the man in the Gospel story. Each one of us is faced with the question: how can we overcome our paralysis? How can we see Jesus?

The Gospel tells us: we have to rely on others to help us. We have to rely on those who we know and on those who we don't know. We have to rely on those with whom we agree, and on those with whom we don't agree. We have to rely on those who we might not invite to our parties. We have to rely on anyone who is committed to following Jesus and who can think creatively, like those in the Gospel story, to help us see Jesus.

That's not an easy course to take. It would be far easier just to stay in the crowd that was gathered around Jesus, the crowd that, for whatever reason, didn't clear a path for the paralyzed man. Staying in the crowd doesn't require commitment, it doesn't pose the possibility of rejection, it avoids conflict. Staying in the crowd allows us to lead an orderly and managed life. Staying in the crowd allows us to avoid the necessary messiness that happens when you break through roofs.

Think about those folks breaking through the roof: we don't know how long it took to punch a hole in the roof. We don't know how many times they had to stop and rethink their approach, and

maybe have to punch another hole. We don't know if they had to deal with an angry homeowner. We don't know what sort of muck fell down on the heads of those, like Jesus, already in the house.

What we do know is this: those folks who helped the paralyzed man didn't stay in the crowd; they took on the messy task of breaking through the roof; they kept at that task through whatever difficulties; and they succeeded.

The paralyzed man saw Jesus. And so did they.

Twenty centuries later, they challenge us:

Can we step out of the crowd?

Can we allow ourselves to rely on those we don't agree with, on those who are different from us?

Can we start breaking some holes in some roofs?

Can we help each other see Jesus?

How about it, Flossmoor – are you ready to break a hole in this roof? Are you ready to help people see Jesus?

I once heard Frederick Buechner, the noted Presbyterian pastor and author, say that he wasn't going to church much anymore because he "couldn't find God there." I don't know if he still feels this way.

But we don't come to church to find God. We come to church, we come to our community of faith, to acknowledge that we have to rely on one another to help each other overcome our paralysis, to help each other see Jesus.

We come so that, together, when we do see Jesus, we can confess, with Peter, that he is the "Christ, the son of the living God."

When we make that confession, we set out on a journey, together. A journey to break as many holes in as many roofs as possible in order to allow other people to see Jesus.

We don't know exactly how long, how contentious, how messy, or how difficult that journey will be.

What we do know, though, is that eventually our journey will lead us to the foot of a cross.

And then to an empty tomb.

And it is there that God finds us.

God finds us, in all of our diversity, in all of our disagreements, in all of our messiness.

God finds you. God finds me. God finds the church.

Thanks be to God.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

The love of God

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Be with you, and with all God's people, now and forevermore.