

## **How Heavy is the Faith of Our Friends?**

**Mark 2:1-12**

**Day of Action and Service**

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Since moving to Omaha I have not only learned a lot about this city and its many claims to fame, but as a new Omahan, I have also then become the reporter to outsiders about the amazing things found in our city. I love how people brag we are the “best kept secret in the Midwest.” Here is a list of things that always elicits some respect. Warren Buffet, the oracle of Omaha is always a big hit. Our zoo is something most people don’t know about, but once they experience it they are hooked! Everyone sings the praises of Omaha Steaks and they of course immediately fall in love with Old Market. The list continues but one of the most significant pieces of Omaha that evokes respect is Boys Town. Beginning in 1917 with only \$90 Father Flanagan responded to the needs of boys living on the streets. There was hardly enough money to feed them, but these boys received stronger nourishment than just food. They received love, care, patience and understanding in rich quantities. With this new venture, Father Flanagan began his pioneering effort to educate and empower children so they could avoid the crippling affects of life in poverty. Boys Town is now a nationally based organization, continuing this model of support and care for boys and girls around the country.

This is one of the many reasons why I’m proud to be a member of this community and why I am so glad we’re following in similar footsteps. Over the past 4 weeks we have learned about many other organizations offering this same kind of

care and step out of poverty. I hope this has been a time of discovering and awareness for you; and today is only the beginning of our commitment to live with all of our neighbors in Omaha. We've learned about the stark reality of poverty in our city; but today we're worshiping and living within the spirit of care and support for our people that is alive and well in our city, church, and faith. That spirit is the work and very image of Boy's Town, which evokes the message of our biblical story for today. It was not only from the love and support of Father Flanagan that these boys were able to flourish, but the boys themselves had faith in one another, offering support, friendship and care. The statue out front and the icon for Boys Town is very similar to the four friends from our text for today. One boy carrying another, smaller boy on his back, with the placard below stating a line from the Black Spiritual "he ain't heavy, he's my brother." No one in need is too heavy to carry. No one in need is denied, or rejected. In fact, the very opposite is to be our response.

We are to be like Father Flanagan, these boys, and the four friends from our text. I imagine the four friends trudged and struggled along, carrying their paralyzed friend for many miles. I imagine they might have even rethought their plan when faced with the overwhelming crowds at the door. The text doesn't allude to how they were feeling, or what they were thinking, however. Instead, the text tells us

"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.”<sup>1</sup>

The faith of these friends carried an entire man,

and broke through the roof.

The faith of these friends carried a man in need,

and challenges, rather than people, were stepped over.

We have most certainly learned about the tremendous challenges of Omaha; and yes, I too am discouraged by the statistics. It is no easy task to begin thinking through the reality of 6 in 10 African American children in Omaha live in poverty. It is a painful reality and then an even heavier burden when we learn the average age of people living in homelessness in Omaha is 9. I agree with you that it would be so very easy to just not go into North Omaha to see this first hand. As we’ve learned the past 4 weeks, homelessness and poverty is not just relegated to certain places. We see people paralyzed by homelessness on the streets driving home from work. Children and teenagers, you sit at lunch tables with fellow students imprisoned by poverty as they eat their free or government subsidized lunch. We see it. And most of all, God sees it, too. We may not know fully what to do, but today’s scripture begins to give us a clue as to how, we as a community can best figure out a response to the sinful systems contributing to poverty. These friends, through faith and love did what they thought needed to be done. And faith and actions like these friends are what God calls us to.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:4 NRSV

As they carried their friend to the best healer they knew, many of the social organizations we heard from throughout our series, and the very same places we're working with today provide that same kind of support. Habitat for Humanity is just one of those organizations. Finding ways for families, most often headed by single mothers, Habitat for Humanity helps the community collaboratively raise roofs over the heads of people in need. Omaha native Benjeana Jack, single mother of two sons, found herself in a paralyzing situation when more than 50% of her income was used to provide housing for her family. She was unable to remain in one apartment for long resulting in constant moves, school changes for her boys, and constant anxiety and worry about where they might find an affordable home. Through Habitat for Humanity and countless community volunteers, Benjeana found that support so she could eventually stand up, and walk on her own. Because of this support she was finally able to provide more stability for her boys. That stability also allowed her to go back to school and complete not one but three degrees.

The larger community through Habitat for Humanity provided that support that the four friends in Mark's gospel provided for their sick friend. Carrying him to the many places he needed, Habitat for Humanity provided this same sort of mobility and empowerment for Benjeana and her children. Habitat provided the means for a home, but moreover, they provided that faith and support she needed to rise from her mat and walk. And when challenges arise, we only have to look at the gospel for an answer. For Mark's gospel tell us the friends dug through the roof, and lowered their friend down.

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are

forgiven.”<sup>2</sup>

The text doesn't say it was the faith of the paralyzed man; but rather, it was the faith of his friends, that brought about healing. It was the faith of four other people, the support, love, encouragement, and that extra help, that allowed one man to be healed. It was the faith of the friends that believed in the power of God to heal. It was the faith of many community volunteers that allowed Benjeana to find her own healing through support and education. And it is through our own faith that we leave our building of worship, to continue worshipping throughout our city.

The faith of friends carried their collective burden,  
and together brought forth healing.

The faith of friends saw a whole person in a broken system,  
and together restored wholeness to the whole community.

Our text claims this man's sins were forgiven, the actual physical healing doesn't occur until later on in the text. This physical healing is not what Jesus calls us to, however. The miracle of this story is what these friends did, and how we can do the same thing. The miracle begins even before the story. The miracle is these four friends were able to see a person in a man whom society saw as sinful. At this time in history physical and mental illness was attributed to sins of your family or yourself. You had done something wrong to earn this sort of ailment. And today, we know that sort of thinking is outdated, misinformed, and just wrong. But we do have our versions of these thoughts. We might think or say things such as “why don't they just get a job,” or “they're just lazy and want to live off the government,”

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 2:5 NRSV

or “they’re just drunks or drug addicts looking for their next fix.” These sorts of statements convey the belief that people struggling within the reality of poverty somehow deserve where they are. These sorts of statements then also reveal our denial of picking up that mat, and for a while, carrying our friend so that she or he might be able to find her or his own feet again.

Yes, it is true that many people in homelessness struggle with addictions, but when your community does not provide you opportunities or teach you methods of coping with the hard life you live, you search for comfort in the only places you can find. When you don’t have access to proper health and mental care, you find alternatives for medication. It is also true that many people searching for jobs don’t live in the places where those jobs are located. And I am sure you might have an idea of how effective our cities bus system really is. Are you lazy because you might have to walk 50 blocks to get to work? *We can be that additional place of comfort. We can be faithful people who see beyond these excuses to see the people and God behind them. We can be the church that moves beyond walls to live and work with people. God calls within and beyond the walls of church buildings so all people might live as the church. We can be the faithful people who see the light of God glowing in the faces of these people on the streets or in the school lunchroom. They’re just waiting to be given the opportunity and tools to work with, and that’s exactly what we’re doing today. We can all work with God to make our city, our home, our community a greater place.*

Jesus isn’t calling us to “fix” this or even know the right answers. Instead, he’s calling us to be together. In the scripture he claims it is easier to forgive sins

than to ask this man rise from his mat. Demonstrating the tremendous power and grace that is our God, Jesus does in fact empower this man to rise, but he is clear when he claims the miracle is to forgive sins. The sins of our excuses and blame can be forgiven. And so while we most certainly need to be the folks carrying the mat, I think perhaps we are also the ones whom need forgiveness. We, the ones who cast the blame and doubt upon people struggling in unjust systems, can be forgiven. And that forgiveness comes in greeting one another, caring for one another, loving and listening to one another. Folk singer Derek Webb writes in his song, “Rich Young Ruler,”

Rich Young Ruler: ☐(vs. 1)☐poverty is so hard to see when it’s only on your TV and twenty miles across town where we’re all living so good that we moved out of Jesus’ neighborhood where he’s hungry and not feeling so good from going through our trash he says, more than just your cash and coin I want your time, I want your voice I want the things you just can’t give me

... Because what you do to the least of these my brother’s, you have done it to me because I want the things you just can’t give me

As God is father, mother, parent to us all, God looks at each one of us, and says I don’t want just your things without you. I want your love, your time. And you give those things to me by giving it to others. And the loving, Creator of all looks to us in our times of worship and action knowing our faith is strong enough to carry the challenges and social sins of our world, and God says, daughter, son, your sins are forgiven. When we see past these excuses and blame we are freed from our sins of doubt, and people in need are given the same opportunities and support we have

been blessed to begin our own lives with. When we work with people in need, empowering them to stand tall with the integrity and joy of one of God's created, we all stand a little taller and walk a little lighter. This is what we've done these last 4 weeks. We've listened, prayed, worshiped, and opened ourselves up to the painful reality of our world. But as God is present in all of these places, we've then also opened ourselves up to God. Today we're opening ourselves up to God in a multitude of ways and places. When we all work together, carrying this burden through faith and love, it not only is bearable, but it becomes lighter with every healing that ensues.

The faith of those friends brought about healing for one man,

and then all 5 were able to walk a little lighter,

dancing together as friends and God's beloved.

Go, carry that mat, be with God's beloved so that all may stand and dance together in God's kin-dom. And then all people can truly say "We have never seen anything like this before."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 2:12