

# Our Role as 'Mat Carriers'

“...and after having dug through the roof,  
they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.”

Mark 2:1-12  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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February 15, 2015

There's a wonderful element involved in Bible study that never ceases to amaze me. You read or hear something that really speaks to you in a particular biblical story or verse, but the next time you read or hear it, something else completely different touches your heart or mind. So over the years, here's something I've learned to make biblical stories more interesting, meaningful and personal. **Don't necessarily jump too quickly to what might seem to be the main point of the story.** One of the most effective ways to do this is to take time to **put yourself in the shoes of the different characters to see how the story might unfold from their perspective.** In other words, there is a different lesson that can be learned when approached from the perspective of each character in the story.

Broadway picked up on this idea when it retold the story of the Wizard of Oz through the eyes of the maligned Wicked Witch of the West in the musical *Wicked*. Disney jumped on this bandwagon in one of last year's more popular movies. *Maleficent* is a retelling of the classic story of Sleeping Beauty from the perspective of maligned wicked fairy godmother. When this technique is applied to Bible stories, what often happens is that at any given moment in our own personal journey of faith, or life circumstances, we seem to gravitate toward and relate more with one particular character or perspective over another. That's why the next time you read that particular biblical story, perhaps years later, you may identify more with a different character or perspective.

Let's take today's story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man as an example, for there are several interesting, informative, and different perspectives. **The cast of characters in any given story is often larger than we realize.** The cast in this story includes:

- the large **crowd** that gathered around Jesus to hear him teach;
- the **four friends** who carried their paralyzed friend on a mat, then who rip an opening in the roof of the house in order to lower the man down to Jesus;
- there's the **paralyzed man** himself, who's sins are forgiven, and who's body is healed so that he was able to stand up and walk home;
- there is **Jesus**, of course, who after being interrupted by human need brings healing and wholeness to the paralyzed man, both in terms of spiritual healing – in the forgiveness of his sins, and of physical healing;

- and there are the **scribes**, who accuse Jesus of blasphemy for making claims of forgiveness that only God can make. For the scribes, the entire incident is one of who has the proper authority to say and do certain things. Jesus, in their estimation, was outside the limits of proper authority.

At some level, there is probably a bit of each and every character in all of us that you and I can relate to. On this particular Sunday, perhaps you relate most to **the crowd** – those who gather in the presence of the Divine with much interest and great anticipation to learn and grow. Hopefully that is something that each of us do every time we get together. Or, perhaps it's **the group of friends** you connect with, the mat carriers, doing whatever it takes to help another who is in need. Many of you may relate to **the one who is paralyzed**, by recognizing things in your life, whether they be physical, emotional or spiritual, that are holding you back from experiencing wholeness and living life to the fullest. Since we are all called to carry on the ministry of Jesus, it is not uncommon to relate to **Jesus** himself. In Jesus, we recognize our calling to offer forgiveness, wholeness and possibilities for new life to others. And yes, there are times when we are like **the scribes**, questioning the authority that others claim to have – especially those whom we believe have no right to be in positions of authority, or for those whose authority we no longer respect.

I mention all these possibilities of relating to different characters because I believe that **any biblical text has many different points to make**. But when I prepare a sermon I usually try focus on just one particular element, angle or theological point. For I've also learned that most folks, including myself, are better able to remember one point that is hopefully made well, than umpteen points, or even the more typical "3-point" sermon that many preachers were taught in seminary.

So with that being said, when I read this particular biblical story this past week it wasn't Jesus and the issues of healing and forgiveness that drew my attention and imagination, or the life struggles of the paralyzed man, nor the devotion of the crowd, nor the scribes with authority issues. Instead, when I thought about this congregation it was the actions of the friends of the paralyzed man that I connected with most. What moved me was what this story has to say about being a compassionate friend to someone in need; or, to use the imagery from the story itself, being a mat carrier.

The four friends, each carrying a corner of the mat on which their paralyzed friend lay, could not get inside the house to see Jesus because the crowd was so large. Not letting that stop them, they took the extraordinary measure of climbing up on the roof with their friend. Ripping open a hole they lowered him down on his mat directly in front of Jesus. The gospel writer Mark describes the result of this effort with the simple phrase, "**Jesus saw their faith**" – the faith of the four friends. Interestingly, there is no specific mention of the faith of the man needing to be healed. And there is no public confession of faith accompanying these actions because the actions themselves spoke of their confidence and trust in Jesus. Unlike most other miracle healing stories, which include the line, "Your faith has made you well," this paralyzed man was healed in response to the faith shown by his friends. So here are some important questions that I'd like you to reflect upon.

- Have you ever considered that it may be the faith, love, compassion and actions of your family, friends or community that helps contribute to your healing and wholeness?
- Have you ever considered that it may be by *your* faith, love, compassion and actions that a family member or friend (or perhaps a complete stranger) has found healing and wholeness?

Note that **the friends of the paralyzed man were willing to do whatever it took to help their friend. And it took all four of them, working together, to do it!** They operate under the principle: *If you can't go in through the door, then go in through the roof!* Perhaps that's not a bad operating procedure for us to follow. These friends did not give up. It was their very actions that acted as prayers, thus expressing their faith, hope, and love. Their example, therefore, should give us strong encouragement to intercede on behalf of those who are ill or in special need. It should give us courage to accompany our prayers with very real actions.

Yes, we need to pray for others and we need others to pray for us. But **often those prayers must take the form of needing to take action.** And that may require asking others to join with us. That's the approach taken by our Congregational Care ministry team, and it's why we need the help of each person in this congregation.

Perhaps we can deduce that **while our individual faith is important, so is the faith and actions of this entire community.** To use the imagery of today's story, sometimes you may find yourself like the paralyzed person laying on the mat, relying on the help of your family, friends and community to carry you; at other times you may need to be like one of the mat carriers, joining with family, friends and this community of faith to help another.

**Give thanks to God for those who have been, or currently are, 'mat carriers' in your life** – those willing to rip a hole in a roof to help bring you to healing and wholeness. And **be willing to be a 'mat carrier' for others. In fact, let us be a congregation of 'mat carriers'.**

Amen.