

“The Fellowship of the Mat”
The Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 11, 2009

1 Samuel 16:14-23
Mark 2:1-12

So Saul said to his servants, ‘Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me.’ 1 Sam. 16:17

³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.
Mark 2:3

The faith of committed friends creates the kind of community that heals and makes whole ... quite literally where two or three are gathered ... there too is the Great Physician.

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King Saul, was afflicted by an evil spirit, and though we can only guess how it manifested itself in his life we can be certain that it was debilitating; enough so that it disturbed not only him but his attendants and servants.

Most likely he was suffering from what today would be diagnosed as severe migraines or debilitating depression ... physical and mental illnesses beyond the understanding of ancient medicine. But one thing was clear to his attendants and physicians - the evil spirit was from God ... *“for the world of biblical perspective is a world without secondary cause. All causes are finally traced back to God who causes all. All the spirits that beset human persons are dispatched from this single source.”* (Brueggemann, 125)

King Saul most likely did not have any close friends – if, that is, he was like most monarchs in history. People too close to power are often tempted to grab some of it for themselves; safety requires distance. Saul may not have had close friends, but he did have a coterie of servants – people whose livelihood and well being were tied to that of their employer. For King Saul the community surrounding him was most likely artificial. Concern for the King was intimately tied to self concern.

Looking out as much for their ruler as themselves, one of the courtesans says, *“King Saul, command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skilful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.’*

Yes the king replies, ‘Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me.’

That someone is, of course, David, and he found favor in Saul’s sight. *“And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.”*

Unlike King Saul, The Paralytic’s, condition can be readily surmised ... he is unable to walk. Mark limits his description of the man to only the name of his condition - leaving ramifications of his affliction to us. This man’s life is limited to a three foot by six foot pallet or woven mat. His world is his room. Someone had to feed him, carry him to the latrine. Someone had to clothe him, and clean up after him.

How long had he lived this way? Was he born unable to walk? Unlikely. Babies with birth defects did not survive in those days ... most were not allowed to live. Did his affliction come upon him as a youth? It had to have doubly difficult. Children can be so very cruel to other children who are different. Did they call him names? As an adult they sure did. Sinner!!

He knew what they called him. He overheard the constant questions: *“Who sinned, this nameless man or his parents, that God punished him this way?”* Illness and affliction were still understood to come from God. Yet by this time in the development of Jewish theology it was understood as either self-inflicted, or passed to him through parents or ancestors. In either case it was the result of sin. The ancient’s may have believed that God was the single source of all blessings and afflictions, but in this man’s day one’s sinful behavior was the precipitating cause.

And there was nothing that could be done for him. There is not one thing of value that he could do; no way for him to contribute to society. His only purpose is to go through life as a beggar – laid by the side of the road, probably just outside the house – totally dependent on the few coins dropped in his hand; totally dependent upon God for everything you and I take for granted.

“Alms? Alms for the poor?!” Day after day in the heat and the cold. Season after long season. Year after unending year. And at night ...

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the lord my soul to keep.
Four corners to my bed,
Four angels there aspread;
Two to foot and two to head.
And four to carry me ...*

Four angels. Is that what they were to this crippled man had so very little? What they were to him would have been worth his weight in gold to King Saul, and what these four did is of such value that variations of his healing are found in all four gospels, for he has what no other character in scripture can claim ... **an amazing set of friends -- and four of them brought him to Jesus to be healed.** It was their act in faith that Jesus praised and for which the Great Physician made the crippled man whole.

Together they were the **Fellowship of the Mat!**

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In much of life our immediate attention is drawn to primary actors, whether it be in a play, or a movie or a book ... or a biblical narrative. It is the Davids and the Sauls, or Jesus and the Scribes, which catch our attention as they so often should, for they carry the message and drive the storyline.

Yet without supporting actors - secondary characters - these two stories might not even have occurred, and without occurring and having been remembered, these stories would never to have found their way into Holy Scripture. Without the servants who remembered the musician David ... Saul might have wallowed in his agony for years longer, until he couldn't take it any more. Without the four friends who carried the paralytic's pallet, and dug through an adobe roof, Jesus would never have seen him or been able to heal him.

This is not say that God could not have carried out the Divine Will as it related to David's ascendancy and Saul's decline, or that Jesus' ministry would have been diminished without supporting characters, but these stories both point to **the critical role of devoted friends in creating the environment for the nurture of human wholeness and the possibility for healing.**

John Ortberg in his book Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them, reminds us independent minded Christians that the story of the healing of the paralytic is really a story of community – this crippled man, by the culture of his day, should have had no friends, but he did – friends so devoted to him that they would go to the trouble to tear through someone's roof to bring him to Jesus.

Ortberg sees in this act, something that takes a bit of pondering to find a handhold in our mind: **the mat upon which this crippled sinner lay, rather than creating a great gulf between him and any meaningful relationship, the mat upon which lay became an opportunity for servanthood and more importantly for acceptance - the recognition that everybody has a mat!**

The paralytic's mat stands for human brokenness and imperfection; it's that part of your life that you most desire to hide, the piece you dare not share. Your mat could be a temper you can't seem to control; or a fear you cannot rid yourself of; or an unhealthy compulsion; or an inability to trust others.

Whatever it is most of us spend our whole lives doing "mat management" – we don't want people to get to know us as we really are, for like the paralytic, to expose our faults would create distance not meaningful community. We think we think we have to be perfect and our families, and our circle of friends and our churches have to be perfect.

"But there is no ideal community" writes Jean Vanier, in his book Community and Growth.

"Community is made up of people with all of their richness, but also with their weakness and poverty. Community is made up of people who accept and forgive each other and who are vulnerable with each other. The foundation of community is not perfection, but humility and trust."

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"They are sitting in the basement of a church. But it could also be at an American Legion post or an after hours hospital cafeteria. Fluorescent lights hum overhead. There is an urn of coffee, and a basket which will be passed around at some point in which those who can afford it will put in a dollar to help pay for the coffee ... and to pay for use of the space.

"In one sense they are strangers who know each other only by first names and almost nothing else about each other. In another sense they are best friends who little by little have come to know each other from the inside out instead of the other way around, which is the way we usually do it.

"They do not know each others biographies, but they know each other's frailties, failures, fears. They know something too about each other's strengths, hopes, gladness, and about where they have found them. They do not give each other advice. They simply give each other stories about the good and the bad of what has happened to them over the years.

"They tell each other their secrets, and if you were invited to sit among them you might hear other things ... your own secrets on their lips."

As Frederick Buechner, describes that basement room, in his memoir entitled Telling Secrets, these folks come from all walks of life; from every strata and class. They range in age from 'twenty-somethings' to octogenarians; from those who never

finished high school to those with graduate degrees; They do however share one common experience: they live each day with direct or indirect ravages of substance abuse, of addiction. And the glue that holds them together – tighter than the bonds of blood or marriage – is that they all believe they cannot live fully human lives without each other and without their Higher Power. The program they follow avoids the word God to open the door of this sacred space to even those who do not believe in God.

What they do believe in, or are searching for, is a power higher than their own which will make them well. Many would say that it is the power of the group itself. **The healing power of devoted friends - the Fellowship of the Mat.**

Henri Nouwen, in The Wounded Healer, paints a word picture of this kind of fellowship:

“Community arises where the sharing of pain takes place, not as stifling form of self-complaint, but as a recognition of God’s saving promises. A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision” (95)

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Let us pray ...

For those who share our lives;

We give you thanks O God!

For those who help us bear our burdens;

And those whose burdens we can lighten

We give you thanks O God!

For those always ready to listen;

For those who are quite literally the healing hand of Christ for us.

We give you thanks.

For eyes to see our own handicaps,

For courage to ask for help,

For encouragement to help carry our friends

We give you thanks

For the community of Christ

For the healing power of devoted friends

For the fellowship of the Mat

Four corners to my bed,

Four angels there aspread;

Two to foot and two to head.

And four to carry me ...

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Great Physician! Amen

Stephen R. Vance
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, South Carolina

Resources:

Brueggemann, Walter. First and Second Samuel. Interpretation Commentary Series.
Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990

Buechner, Frederick. Telling Secrets New York: Harper Collins, 1991

Ortberg, John. Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them Grand Rapids:
Zondervan Press, 2003

Nouwen, Henri J. M., The Wounded Healer. New York: Doubleday, 1972

Vanier, Jean. Community & Growth. New York: Paulist Press, 1989

For Addition Reading:

Doughty, Stephen V. Discovering Community – A Meditation on Community in
Christ. Nashville: Upper Room, 1999