Hospitality: The Healing of a Paralyzed Man
By Rev. Emily Chapdelaine, 11.8.26

When we study the gospels, we often start by naming what the gospel writer's intention was when he began writing. In Matthew's case, he is writing to convince his own Jewish community that Jesus is the messiah. In Luke's case, he is writing to prove that Jesus came for the gentiles as well as the Jews. The gospel of John is written with a focus on theological meaning making, this is why it was written later and why it is so different from the other three. But what of Mark? The first gospel. Scholars have largely decided that the gospel of Mark was written in Rome, to a Roman Christian audience. But what I think is arguably more important than who Mark wrote to is the style in which he did it. Mark's gospel is apocalyptic.

Today we would culturally define 'apocalypse' as the end of the world, but this is not so at the time Mark was written. In fact, apocalypse is just the Greek word for revelation. Mark is attempting to do more than simply give a basic biography of Jesus' life and work. Mark has a revelatory agenda. He wants to reveal that Roman culture is insidious, that it projects a false definition of greatness. For Rome, greatness is predatory. It is reliant on violent domination of others. What Mark's gospel reveals is that Jesus has shown us a path to resist empire without becoming like it. An ancient version of activist and writer Audre Lorde's central thesis in her essay of the same name, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Through Mark, Jesus is offering us a new way and new tools. Tools that are at work even when it doesn't seem like they are. However, while these new tools are wholly removed from the Roman preference for violent domination, they are not devoid of conflict. In fact, these tools that Jesus offers us often *invite* conflict because they threaten the existing power structures and expose false projections of greatness and power. Jesus' ministry was offensive, and that offense cost him his life. Discipleship means following Jesus' lead, even and especially when he leads us into conflict.

With this perspective in mind, let us reread our story. *Verse 1*. We discussed in bible study whether it was just a house or whether it was Jesus' home. Different translations say different things, but I did some research and most scholars believe that this likely references the disciple Peter's house in Capernaum. Jesus lived with Peter in his house for the three years that he ministered around the sea of Galilee. So the answer is both yes and no, this is not Jesus' house, but it does seem to be the place he calls home for a time. *Verses 2-4*. They dug through Peter's roof. For the sake of their friend, they dug through Peter's roof. Now, you might be thinking that it wouldn't take that long to repair a first century roof, it's not like they were using shingles, it's not like they were pitched. It was a flat roof with support beams, thatching, and mud. What I learned however is that a first century roof in Galilee often required a roof roller as the last step. A 2 foot long stone cylinder that you rolled across the roof to compact it all together to make it water tight.

What I'm trying to say here, is that if you dug through my roof, however complicated or uncomplicated the repair was, there would definitely be conflict! I would ask questions like, why couldn't you just wait a while and come in the door? I would make statements like, you'll have to pay for this!! Jesus does not do any of this, even though he may have to sleep with a hole in the ceiling that night. *Verse 5*. Jesus sees the paralytic, but more than that he sees the man's friends. I know the scripture doesn't say they were friends, but come on, you have to be friends to carry someone to a healer. You have to care so much about someone if you're willing to carry them onto the roof and then dig a hole in it so they can access healing. Now the scripture also never says why the friends are bringing the paralyzed man to Jesus. We all assume it's to be physically cured from his paralysis. This is a logical assumption, it is consistent with what Jesus has already done and what he will continue to do. It is also consistent with the end of the story. But I want to consider the alternative.

One of the newest fields in theological studies is disability theology. A form of studying our theology and our scriptures that wrestles with the existence of disability, God's goodness, and most relevant here, how to interpret these healing miracles in ways that are not harmful to the disability community. Many disabled biblical interpreters have made a distinction between healing and curing. You see, in the ancient world, many of the things we consider disabilities made people outcasts. The gospels are littered with stories of disabled people who are accused of deserving their disability and who are excluded from the community. For these people, holistic healing did involve being cured of their disability, because the culture was such that they could not be reconciled to their community without that cure. This paralyzed man, however, has four friends who were willing to cause conflict and destroy a roof just to get him healing. This man does not seem to need reconciliation with the community, he has good loving relationships already. Jesus saw ***their*** faith. Not the paralytic's faith. At least not the paralytic's faith alone, but his community's faith. Jesus tells the man, your sins are forgiven, but he does not cure the paralysis immediately. He shows that sin is not linked to this man's condition, and that curing the condition is not necessary for this man's healing.

Now we get to the scribes. *Verses 6-8*. We like to paint the scribes as villains, but as someone brought up in bible study, their reaction here is totally reasonable. They don't know who Jesus is. They just see this guy, who is suddenly super popular, who has not been formally educated in any way, literally forgive a man's sins. Not to mention that throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus is begging people not to talk about his work not to tell anyone that he is the messiah. We know who Jesus is, but for the scribes, his identity is tightly under wraps. Also, in case you didn't notice, these scribes only say it in their hearts. They don't even confront Jesus yet! He just reads their minds and then chastises them for their thoughts. That doesn't feel super fair to me. But this is the beginning of Jesus' conflict with the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes and the Pharisees who just one chapter later will conspire with Roman officials to get rid of Jesus. Jesus offers a new way, new tools, to these leaders and they cannot understand. Mark offers them grace in that more often than not the disciples cannot understand either. But the disciples do not feel threatened so they do not collaborate with the empire.

Jesus continues, *remaining verses*. Jesus and Mark are offering the scribes and all of us tools of resistance here. First, although there are any number of practical reasons for Jesus to specifically request that the no longer paralyzed man take his mat, we know that Mark is a man of few words. To have Jesus say take up your mat twice means it is important. I wonder if this is a uniquely personalized version of Jesus' later teaching, take up your cross and follow me. Take up your mat, a reminder of your suffering, a reminder of the friends and the faith that sustained you, a call to care for others who are suffering as you once did. Not to try and cure them, but to be in community with them, to make meaning with them, to love them, to heal them. This man's condition was not a problem to be solved, but a difference wherein creativity was sparked. A difference that pushed through homogeny to offer growth. Asking this man to take his mat is a reminder to him and to all of us that the people on the margins have things to teach us about God, about what makes a good life. Things that we cannot learn on our own.

The second tool on display here is hiding in Jesus' rebuke of the scribes. Jesus rebukes them, rather abruptly, because they have fallen into a trap and they do not realize it. They have made an idol out of the rules, and prioritized those very same rules over the people. They did not see the faith of the man or his friends. They did not celebrate that his sins were forgiven. They questioned Jesus' authority. They questioned his qualifications before thinking about anything else. So this second tool is to never be so enthralled by procedure, by bureaucracy that we lose sight of the humanity around us. That we are unable to see grace when it comes to us and unwilling to pass it along. This doesn't mean that the rules are unimportant, especially for those of us who like things to be decent and in order, but care and justice for humanity supersedes order. In fact there cannot be true decency and order when all people do not have all that they need to thrive. Our God has abundant grace and power and mercy and love. God does not need protection, God does not need our rules. God asks us to care for God's people.

Now, you may be wondering how this all relates to hospitality. We often think of hospitality as something nice, something sweet. When we think of hospitality we dream of things that are pretty or delicious or comfortable. These things are lovely, but they are not all that hospitality encompasses. In this scripture, we see that hospitality is messy, it can breed conflict, it sometimes requires destruction. It feels counterintuitive to accept that the gospel message brings such upheaval. But what is the gospel if not good news for all people. Good news for the infant wailing in the pews. Good news for the trans person trying to decide if this is a safe place for them. Good news for the blind. Good news for the child with loud questions. Good news for the person who irritates the stew out of you every Sunday when you see them. Good news for the deaf. Good news for the ones with mental health diagnoses. Good news for the paralytic. Good news for his friends. Good news for the scribes. Good news for all is a little bit inconvenient, isn't it? We say good news for all, but not those people over there. We say good news for all, but not if it affects my life. We say good news for all, but not if welcoming all requires us to change, *and it does*. It requires us to change and grow and destroy and create. But mostly it requires us to love. It requires us to see people. It requires us to put down the tools of empire and follow the way of Christ. To be truly hospitable, we must accept that we will be irritated and inconvenienced, perhaps we will even be taken advantage of, in service of the gospel. Jesus' type of hospitality led to his death. It was costly to him, it will be costly to us. The good news for all is that we get to try following Jesus every day, and even if we never succeed, never progress, even still the good news is for us. The Living God is doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?

- Audre Lorde's essay, The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House as printed in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110-114. 2007. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/audre-lorde-the-master-s-tools-will-never-dismantle-the-master-s-house