Rev. Mel Smith

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Mark 2.1-12

July 1, 2021

Tearing off the roof

Tomorrow morning our Vacation Bible School program begins. For four days, children ages 4yrs-5th grade will come to listen to and engage with bible stories through music, storytelling, games and art.

Courtney Chandler, Our Director of Faith Formation and Family Ministry, has been inspired by Mr. Rogers and developed the theme: “Welcome to the Neighborhood”. Together our children, youth and adults will ask the question “what does it mean to be a friend and neighbor?”

As a staff, we thought this curriculum has a lot to offer not only our children but the whole church-so over the next four weeks, we will hear the same bible stories and explore the same question together.

We kickoff the series with today’s story of the five friends-as they make their way to Jesus.

We don’t know a lot about these five people—what we do know is that word had gotten out about Jesus— his preaching and teaching, along with his ability to heal and cast out demons.

The rumor mills had been busy—as a result, when Jesus returned to Capernaum, the whole town turned up to listen-the crush of people was so great that there wasn’t an inch of space left in the home, or even outside the door.

The five friends had also heard that Jesus was in town and they made a plan to go. Only there were some obstacles in their way.

Four of these friends were able bodied while one was disabled—what his disability was isn’t specified, only that he was paralyzed and relied on his friends for transportation.

Something else the text doesn’t explicitly say, is why these five friends were making the journey to see Jesus.

We can make an assumption -that they were making this trek in the hope and deep faith that Jesus would be able to heal their friend—but no where in this text, does it say that that they were going to Jesus in search of physical healing.

So I wonder—what if the friend who relied on his other friends for transportation had made a request—"hey, guys, I know this would be challenging but, I really want to go see Jesus, I want to listen to him-I want to hear what he has to say—I want to be his disciple…”

What if, out of love and devotion to their friend, they agreed—placing him on a matt, they carried him through town—a journey that probably wasn’t so easy and involved a lot of stops to rest because carrying someone, even by for four able bodies was hard, not to mention being carried probably wasn’t so fun either and maybe he needed some rest breaks too.

When they finally made it to the house, they saw that the whole town had turned up—and the crowed wasn’t about to make way for five more people and a stretcher…

Undeterred, the friends lifted their eyes and spied the roof.

Not like our roofs today, where there’s a slopping pitch and layers of shingles, and tar paper, and ply-wood, insulation and beams. But a flat roof, made of branches and mud—a roof that was sturdy but that could easily be dug through if need be.

Committed to their friend’s request, they hauled him onto the roof and after some work, made a whole big enough to lower him down, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw the man being lowered and the four faces peaking out from the new skylight—he turned to the man on the mat and pronounced “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

This pronouncement sounds a bit odd…Why in the world would Jesus’ first words be about sin?

During our confirmation class we have a whole lesson where we talk about “what is sin”—and we start by making paper airplanes.

We make our aircrafts and then take turns seeing who’s plane can make it closest to the target. Not even the bullseye on the target—just the target itself.

Because as hard as we try, as good as our paper airplane may be—it very rarely, if ever hits the board.

It’s kind of like life—we try hard, as hard as we possibly can to be in relationship with God and with each other, but we’re human and we make mistakes.

Because as much as I say I love the lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and my neighbor as myself—as soon as I start driving, the love of my neighbor is deeply challenged—not to mention when emails are overwhelming, or family members start pushing buttons only they know how to push…

Sin isn’t about adhering to a list of doe’s and don’ts-it’s about relationship—it’s about the choices we make that harm our relationship with God and our relationships with each other.

As Jesus looks at the man on the mat, the man who’s desire to be in relationship with Jesus and in turn with God, a desire so deep it led his friends to tear a whole in the roof—Jesus says the words he most wanted to hear—Son, your sins, all the stuff that keeps you from a right relationship with God and others, all of that is forgiven.

In making this pronouncement Jesus is re-connecting, offering a form of healing that joins the man into the broader community and his desire to be in relationship with God has been met.

Of course we can go on to talk about how Jesus then physically healed the man—but the physical healing isn’t the point of the story—it is the cherry on top—instead—the point of the story is how do we as a community-recognize that God is doing a new thing-that God’s kingdom is made up of all abilities—because first and foremost God’s kingdom is about relationship.

So what does this story mean for us?

Where might we be inspired by the actions of these friends?

Where might we be called to tear off the roof in order to make our community more accessible so that all those who are hungry to experience God’s presence might come in?

As an able bodied person-I don’t always know the needs of those with disabilities-so this is one of those moments when the Facebook community comes in handy.

I asked some questions to the hive mind- “what would a fully inclusive sanctuary/worship space look like? What would we do to make it all physically accessible? How could we ensure that everyone was able to worship freely together?

There was a wide range of responses:

* There would be a quiet space with a window into the sanctuary where people with sensory issues would be welcome to go—so that when overwhelmed they could find a quiet space that still allowed them to participate in worship
* Our website would include “social stories” that would help a new family who has member with Autism talk about what to expect when they visit.
* There could be a children’s worship space in the sanctuary where children would be invited to watch and be involved while also using quiet activities to engage in worship.
* Our bulletins might include brail and be offered online for people to download on their phones during the service.
* We might consider having an interpreter for services who would translate for those with hearing disabilities
* by far the most common refrain with those who responded—was that to include everyone who may have mobility issues, there would be no stairs throughout the whole building—this would allow for easy navigation into the sanctuary, up to the chancel, the lecturn, pulpit and most of all would allow access to the communion table.

Looking at the list of responses—it’s easy to be overwhelmed—how do we begin to understand what to do?

But in the story—it all begins with relationship—the five friends listened to each other—and when their friend said, I want to be part of what God is doing—the other four friends, tore off the roof to make it happen—because God’s kingdom is all about doing a new thing, making a new way, so that all are welcome.

How might we listen to our neighbors and friends?

How might we be called to do a new thing?

How might we be invited to tear off the roof?

Amen.