

Trinity 19 (2024)

Some stories in the Bible seem made for Vacation Bible School and the Sunday School.

An example from the Old Testament would be ‘the walls of Jericho come crashing down’.

I heard a Sunday School teacher tell how her class of primaries dramatized this story. Indeed, they were so enthusiastic that she got word afterward that the adult class next door had to suspend their lesson!

Another story popular with children, this one from the New Testament, is ‘Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree’. I remember this one being acted out in the opening assembly of Vacation Bible School in this church.

A cutout wood tree made by one of the fathers was erected in the crossing. One of the leaders, a five-foot-tall, 80-plus-year-old lady

dressed in a bathrobe with a towel around her head played the part of Zacchaeus. I can see her now perched on stepladder peering out from the branches of that 'tree'.

The story found in today's Gospel, the 'healing of the paralytic', is likewise a winner with children and made for acting.

The version read this morning from Matthew's Gospel is actually a truncated telling of the story.

Mark and Luke supply more dramatic details. These include four friends bringing the paralyzed man on a stretcher, carrying him up on the rooftop (roofs in those days were flat), opening up some tiles and lowering him down to where Jesus was teaching down below.

Nothing, not even a packed house, was going to keep these four friends from bringing

this man to Jesus, and their plan worked. In the end, the man walked away under his own steam.

We might well consider this drama in terms of its ‘cast of characters’. In addition to Jesus, there was the aforementioned paralyzed man and his four friends along with some murmuring religious leaders. Let’s look at how Jesus deals with each subject.

First, He honors faith. His response to the sick man laid at his feet is prefaced with the words, “Seeing *their* faith.”

Whose faith is being referenced here? The faith of the sick man? ///

No, nothing is said of *his* faith: it is the faith of his four friends. This is somewhat unusual.

More often in stories in the Gospels, the faith which precedes someone getting healed is that of the recipient.

The woman with the issue of blood is a case in point. In a crowd, she reaches out and touches Jesus' robe. This was her act of faith, and it was honored.

Realizing what had happened, Jesus turns to her and says: **“Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace.”**

In this case it was her faith that was honored, but not in the case of the paralyzed man. It was the faith of his four friends.

I think there is something we can learn from this part of the story. There are times when a person is so low, so sick in body or depressed in spirit that others have to take over and do for him what he cannot do for himself.

That is often what we do when we pray for others. We bring to Jesus those who are not able to make the journey on their own, whose faith may be weak or non-existent.

There may be someone you have on your heart this morning. Why not bring that person with you as you come to meet Jesus at the Communion Table? Lay that soul at Jesus' feet?

What will He do? We don't know, but it will be the right and gracious thing. Of this we can be sure.

So first, Jesus honored faith of the four friends, but He does something else as well, **He supplied the need of the sick man in more ways than one.**

His friends brought him for physical healing. After lowering him to where Jesus was, they no doubt expected Jesus to reach out His hand and say, **“Be healed. Rise and walk.”**

But that is not what Jesus said, was it? Rather He said, **“Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.”**

Was there a direct link to this man's infirmity and some particular sin?

Or was his sickness just a part of the fallen condition of the human race?

Humans right from the beginning fell into sin and became subject to sin, sickness and death, the Bible teaches

. Thus, we all stand in need of divine forgiveness. Was that what was going on here?

It is hard to say. Regardless, Jesus' approach is in line with what is becoming more and more acknowledged in the world of medicine today . . . there is unity between body and soul. The needs of the whole man need to be addressed, not just his physical symptoms.

I like the stanza of "Just as I am" that says:

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind;
Yes, all I need, in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

In this case, Jesus began with the ‘healing of the mind’. He addressed this man’s inner issue first.

Bringing this down to where are . . . we need to adopt Jesus’ wholistic approach.

It is not enough just to deal with a person’s or society’s outward problems – hunger, poverty, addiction, whatever it is. Inner healing, forgiveness and restoration, is needed. The Gospel of Christ includes both.

Jesus honored faith, the faith of the four friends. He dealt with the total needs of the paralyzed man. Finally, **He meets the criticism of the religious leaders present that day.**

What was their complaint? /// They accused Him of blasphemy.

By pronouncing the man's sins forgiven, Jesus was taking upon Himself the role of God.

If Jesus had been just another prophet, these religious leaders would have been right, because only God can forgive sins.

But Jesus was more than a prophet. He was God's anointed, the Messiah, AND Emmanuel, God with us.

Jesus' response is brilliant. Forgiving sins and getting a paralyzed man off his bed are equally the work of God. Nevertheless, the latter – getting him off his bed – is more visible. With it, there can be no mistake that power from on high has gone out.

On this occasion, Jesus did both. Those steeped in the scriptures – the scribes -- should

have recognized that the day foretold by the prophet Isaiah had arrived.

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert” (35:5,6).

Did they believe? No, but others did and gave God the glory.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, it was the ‘common people’ who heard Him gladly.

What might we take away from the response of these murmuring religious leaders?

I think it is this. Wherever, whenever the Gospel is announced there will be opposition. At times the motives of Jesus’ followers will be questioned and deliberately misunderstood.

Jesus says as much in Matthew 10:25: **“If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more *shall they call them of his household?*”**

What must be our response?

A little verse gives us our cue:

Threats and opposition
Shall not blunt our mission;
Let all the world hear –
God is in control!

That is what Jesus did. He submitted His case to the Father. He let nothing blunt His mission. He went all the way to the cross for your needs and mine. He has given us an example.

Don't worry if people shoot arrows.

Dare to be different. Contend for truth and justice. Champion the cause of the weak. Practice love, kindness, forgiveness and generosity. Tell people about Jesus. Be the Gospel in your community, and leave the rest to God.

The story we have before us this morning is packed with drama. No doubt about it. But it is also filled with practical instruction. As I close, let me remind you of the key points:

- We need to bring the weak and sick to Jesus. Bring someone with you this morning to the Communion rail.
- We need to address the needs of the whole man, body and soul, both individually and in society. Learn from Jesus.
- We should not be surprised when opposition comes. Jesus was not deterred from His mission by it. Neither should we

be. “We’re marching to Zion, the beautiful city of God.” That is where we are heading . . . no turning back, no turning back.