

# Love is Bigger

Luke 5:17-26

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ Luke 5:17-26 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>17</sup> One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. <sup>18</sup> Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; <sup>19</sup> but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. <sup>20</sup> When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." <sup>21</sup> Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" <sup>22</sup> When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? <sup>23</sup> Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk?' <sup>24</sup> But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home." <sup>25</sup> Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. <sup>26</sup> Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."  
(Luke 5:17-26, NRSV)

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On January 11th of this year, Lena and I drove down to Oakland for a very special event. There, along with other members of our family, we made our way to the Paramount Theatre in the middle of the day for a unique occasion. On that day—in that place, over 1000 people filled the first floor of this incredible art deco space to sit through speeches and slide shows, music and instruction to finally take the oath of become American citizens. *A naturalization ceremony.*

In addition to the citizens-to-be on the first floor, hundreds more friends and family filled the balcony to celebrate this incredible milestone. And as the names of the 91 countries that were represented on this day were read, I couldn't help but think of all the barriers that were that were broken through by these new citizens. I

couldn't help but reflect on all the walls that had tumbled down.

Through my own tears of pride and joy for the friend I came to celebrate, I imagined many of these people breaking through these barriers: learning a new language; standing in endless lines; and showing immense patience in their waiting...and waiting... and waiting.

Some came as refugees, others lived in fear of deportation and many struggled just to make ends meet. Some suffered separated families, faced the pain of being "the other," or the loneliness of being a stranger. Yet each one of the individuals that day willingly faced everything that stood in their way for the privilege of being an American citizen.

I have rarely felt as proud of this nation as when I saw our young friend with his citizenship certificate. As a person who was born in this country and has lead a privileged life, I am immensely inspired and challenged by those who had to work so hard to overcome all these barriers.

The story we read today is also a story about breaking through barriers. Jesus is in a home with a group of religious leaders gathered from all over the country. Luke, the gospel writer, tells us that on that day, "the power was with [Jesus] to heal." In light of that, some men are carrying a man to Jesus on a bed of sorts. The man is paralyzed and we assume they are coming to interrupt Jesus' teaching session by requesting healing for their friend.

The crowd is so big the only way the friends can think of getting the man next to Jesus is by climbing up on the roof, creating a big hole there, and lowering their friend into the center of the action. In a touching scene we are told that Jesus sees the faith of the friends and declares the man's sins forgiven.

Jesus words set off the first controversy Jesus has with religious leaders in this gospel. All those leaders gathered wonder aloud whether any human can forgive sins and they accuse Jesus of blasphemy, of offense against God. In response, Jesus confronts these leaders by asking whether it is easier to forgive sins or to physically heal a person. Finally, to demonstrate his the

truth of what he says, Jesus proceeds to heal the man of his paralysis. In no time whatsoever, the man stands up, grabs the bed on which he was lying and takes off rejoicing!

Can you imagine? I cannot. Shock and awe overcomes everyone gathered there and those present utter these words, “We have seen strange things today!” Strange things, indeed!

*There is so much to notice in this story.* It is tender and challenging. It is puzzling and encouraging. But I want us to look at this passage with one lens today. I want us to look at this passage and ask this question. “What barriers are overcome in this story?” What barriers are overcome here?

The first and most obvious barrier is the crowd. How can these men get their friend to Jesus with so many gathered around him? They make a firm and quick decision to climb the roof. The second and more fundamental barrier is the man’s illness, his paralysis. How can their friend live a complete and whole life while experiencing this brokenness? They bring him to Jesus.

But there are other, not so obvious barriers. Can you see them? Though the friends seemed to be bringing the paralyzed man for physical healing, Jesus actually starts by affirming another barrier that is in all of our lives—our sin. Remember, the first thing that Jesus does here is offer forgiveness to the man. Perhaps for Jesus, that is the most powerful barrier any of us faces.

But be careful here, because though some in the ancient world thought that physical infirmity was always a direct result of someone’s sin. That is not at all what Jesus is saying here. In fact, he may well have been trying to break that connection. Jesus sees sin, Jesus sees physical brokenness, and he brings healing and release to all of it.

There is also another barrier here - I wonder if you see this one? That barrier is religion. That’s right - religion. Here, the religious leaders are so caught up in wanting to protect God’s holiness, so focused on guarding the “truth,” that they miss the miracle that is right in front of them.

Jesus is offering people transformation, offering freedom from brokenness, and all the religious leaders want to talk about theological correctness. “Can anyone but God forgive sins?” they say. Jesus and the man’s friends are caught in an act of compassion, and all the clergy gathered can do is think about whether this fits with their understanding of the faith.

I wonder if this isn’t the biggest barrier in the whole passage. We can make our way through the crowds. We can punch a hole in the roof. We can find treatments and cures for disease. But how hard it is for any of us to break through a religion so convinced of its own truth that it walls up compassion. There are voices solely interested in keeping people out.

We hear these voices among our own friends and acquaintances. We hear the words welling up in our own throats. We too have erected religious barriers that tell us—Which march we won’t walk in. Whose political views we refuse to hear. Whose wedding we will not attend. Whose justice is really Jesus’ justice. I am sure you can fill in the blanks with religious barriers that you see.

Sadly, we in the church are too often pushing people away from the table of Jesus. Too often we are primarily interested in walling people out of the God’s kingdom: people who don’t meet our test of purity and orthodoxy, people who don’t believe all the right things. It can be sad and painful.

But there is also good news in this story. Look at how the barriers faced in this passage are overcome. Look at what it is that really leads to healing and transformation.

Did you notice in the story that we never really hear about the paralyzed man’s faith? What we hear about is the faith of his friends. It is the friends who carry him to Jesus’ house. It is the friends who take him up onto the roof. It is the friends who take off the tiles and dig through the ceiling. It is the friends who lower him into the middle of Jesus circle. It is when Jesus saw the faith of the friends that he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”<sup>1</sup>

While all of us would say that this man’s ultimate forgiveness, healing, and transformation comes from Jesus—what gets him to that point, what gets him to Jesus is that faith of his friends.

Have your friends ever carried you? When you weren’t sure if you believed in God’s power? When you didn’t think you had strength to go on? When you were so lost you just needed a word of guidance? When you were so wounded you were thirsty for even a morsel of kindness? I suspect that is what is happening here, with those who came to Jesus in first century Palestine.

But this same thing is happening in 21st Century Sacramento. I want to call your attention to a ministry

<sup>1</sup> Luke 5:20, *NRSV*.

<sup>2</sup> A quote from my friend Mary Lynn Tobin.

that has grown up in this church over the last few years. It is called Heart to Heart. It is not a ministry that some committee thought up in a brainstorming session. It is not a group that some pastor designed and developed. It didn't come with a DVD and workbook. There is no website.

Heart to Heart is a ministry that emerged from just a few people in this church believing that (like the paralyzed man and his friends) we need to carry each other. It is a group of people in this church that offers rides to doctor's appointments, makes phone calls to the lonely, brings meals to those who need a little extra, and puts forth a helping hand and a caring heart. It is so simple yet so profound. We carry each other to a place of healing. We carry each other to Jesus.

You might not be surprised that when I was with a group of clergy friends this week our conversation turned to American politics. And our conversation went the way any of you might expect it to go with your own friends. But one bit of the conversation made me think again. When were debating and anguishing over whether we should or shouldn't be political in our sermons, one woman made this comment, "Why shouldn't we be political? Politics simply means working together to get something done."<sup>2</sup> Politics means people working together to get something done.

Now you may or may not agree with this definition, but if you can allow that there is some truth in it, perhaps you can accept that the Christian faith is inherently political. You see, the early church was not a collection of individuals, but small communities empowered by the Spirit. Politics. The Hebrew people could not imagine religion divorced from community. Politics. The most powerful Biblical image of the church is the "body of Christ," where each part works together for the common good. Politics.

People working together to get something done. People who carried their broken friend to Jesus and wouldn't let anything stand in their way. People working together (by the power of Jesus) to get something done. I'll take those politics.

Those of you who know me well know that I am a hopeless fan of the rock group U2. Though they may no longer be the trendiest music on the airwaves, I still follow their music with passion. I'm the kind of fan who bought their recent album on December 1st—the day if its release—and have been playing it incessantly in my car ever since. There is one song on the album that I am

particularly taken with, a soaring rock ballad called "Love is Bigger Than Anything In Its Way."

While I won't play it for you, let me offer you a bit of the lyric:

*The door is open to go through  
If I could I would come too  
But the path is made by you  
As you're walking start singing and stop talking  
Oh, if I could hear myself when I say  
Oh, love is bigger than anything in its way.<sup>3</sup>*

I really like that phrase, "love is bigger than anything in its way." You might find it a bit hokey, but it has power for me. You see, that's what the people who carried the paralyzed man believed. They had love for him, they saw Jesus' love, and they were willing to take on any barrier. To make their way through crowds, to dig through a roof, to face down religious expectations, to challenge the grip of sin, and to (ultimately) see him healed of his disease.

Writer Maya Angelou (perhaps more poetically) puts it this way:

*Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.<sup>4</sup>*

Friends, despite what I see on the news and social media — I refuse to give up on this world, on this nation, on this congregation, on myself. For you see, the power of love, the act of seeking the good for the other, is real. The power of love finds its source in our faith.

I am often surprised that we as Christians don't pay more attention to these words from the First Letter of John in the Bible:

**God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.<sup>5</sup>**

Maybe this seems too simple, too trite to us. But it is not any of those things at all. It is the core of our faith.

<sup>3</sup> "Love is Bigger Than Anything in Its Way" on *Songs of Experience*, Adam Clayton, Larry Mullen, Dave Evans, Paul David Hewson.

<sup>4</sup> Maya Angelou, Facebook post, Jan. 11, 2013. <https://www.facebook.com/MayaAngelou/posts/10151418853254796>.

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 4:16, *NRSV*.

<sup>2</sup> A quote from my friend Mary Lynn Tobin.

Listen to this passage in another translation, from Eugene Peterson:

**God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us.**<sup>6</sup>

You see, Love is bigger than anything in its way, because God is bigger than anything in our way. Amen.

## The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Jim talked about “barriers” in his sermon. As a way of beginning, what barriers (large or small) do you feel you have faced in your life? What helped you overcome the barriers?
2. Read Luke 5:17-26 again. What stands out to you from this vivid story? What seems odd or challenging?
3. Luke tells us that when Jesus saw the faith of the people who carried their friend to him for healing (not the paralyzed man’s faith) he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven you.’ What did Jesus mean by this? In what way did the faith of these friends influence Jesus’ work?
4. Which is more important to Jesus in this story, forgiveness of sins or physical healing? Why do you think that?
5. Share a time where you witnessed people coming together for a positive outcome in someone’s life. Is it fair to call this love? Why or why not?
6. One of the barriers to Jesus’ work was the expectations and commitments of the established religious leaders. Does religion ever get in the way of God’s work? What does that look like?
7. As Luke tells the story, those witnessing this man’s healing make this comment, “We have seen strange things today.” In what way has your faith opened your eyes to “strange things?”

8. Jim offered this definition of politics: “Politics is working together to get something done.” If you accept this definition, do you think the Christian faith is political? Why or why not?
9. Share your memory of a time where someone else’s faith “carried” you when you couldn’t “carry” yourself.

### Table to Table Question A question for kids and adults to answer together

What kind of things get between us and God?  
How can we work together to help each other know God?

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:16, *The Message*.